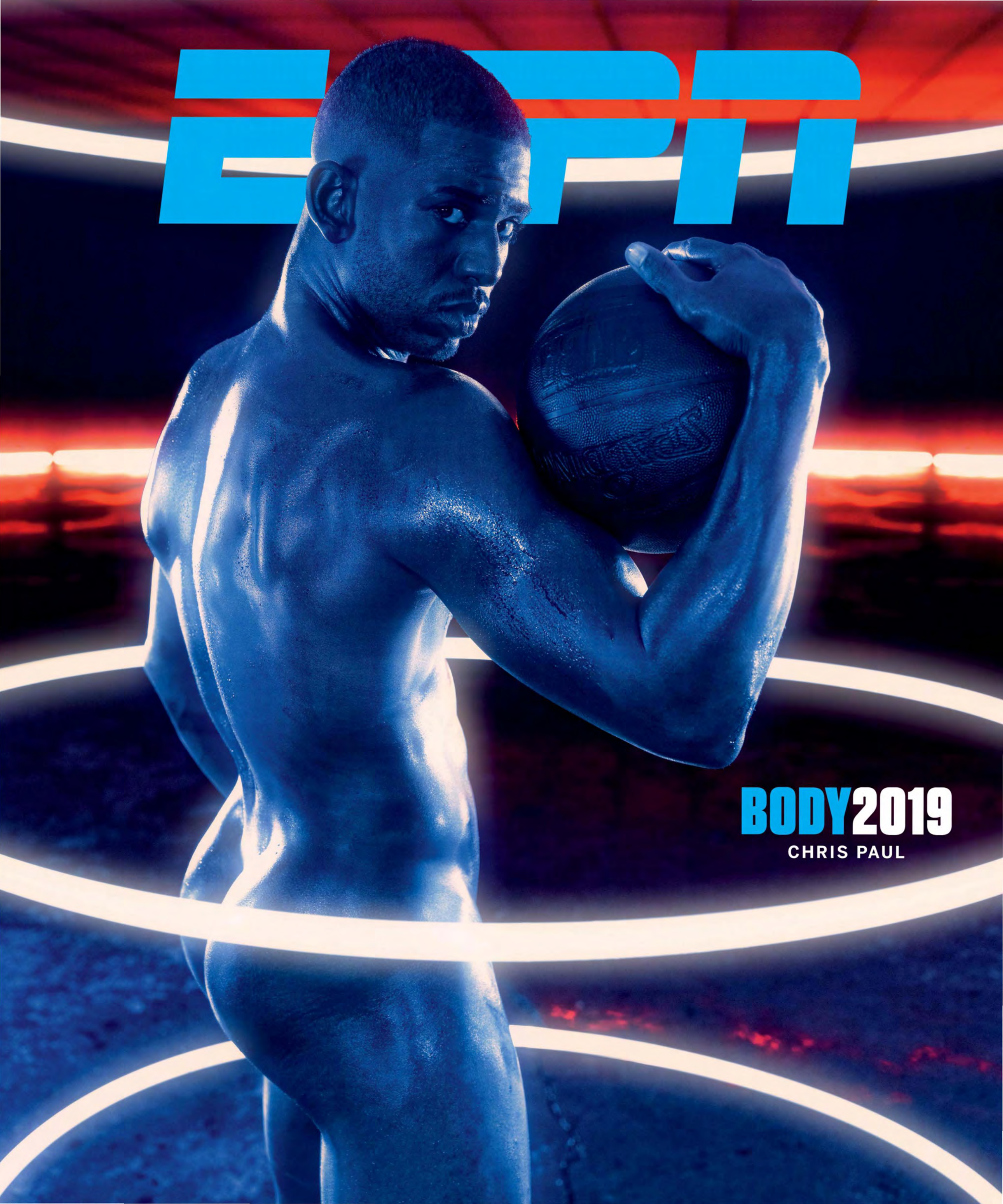


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BODY2019
KELLEY O'HARA



A full-page photograph of Chris Paul, shirtless and muscular, holding a basketball with both hands. He is looking over his shoulder towards the camera. The image is bathed in a blue light, with bright white circular light patterns overlaid. The background is a blurred basketball court with red and blue lighting.

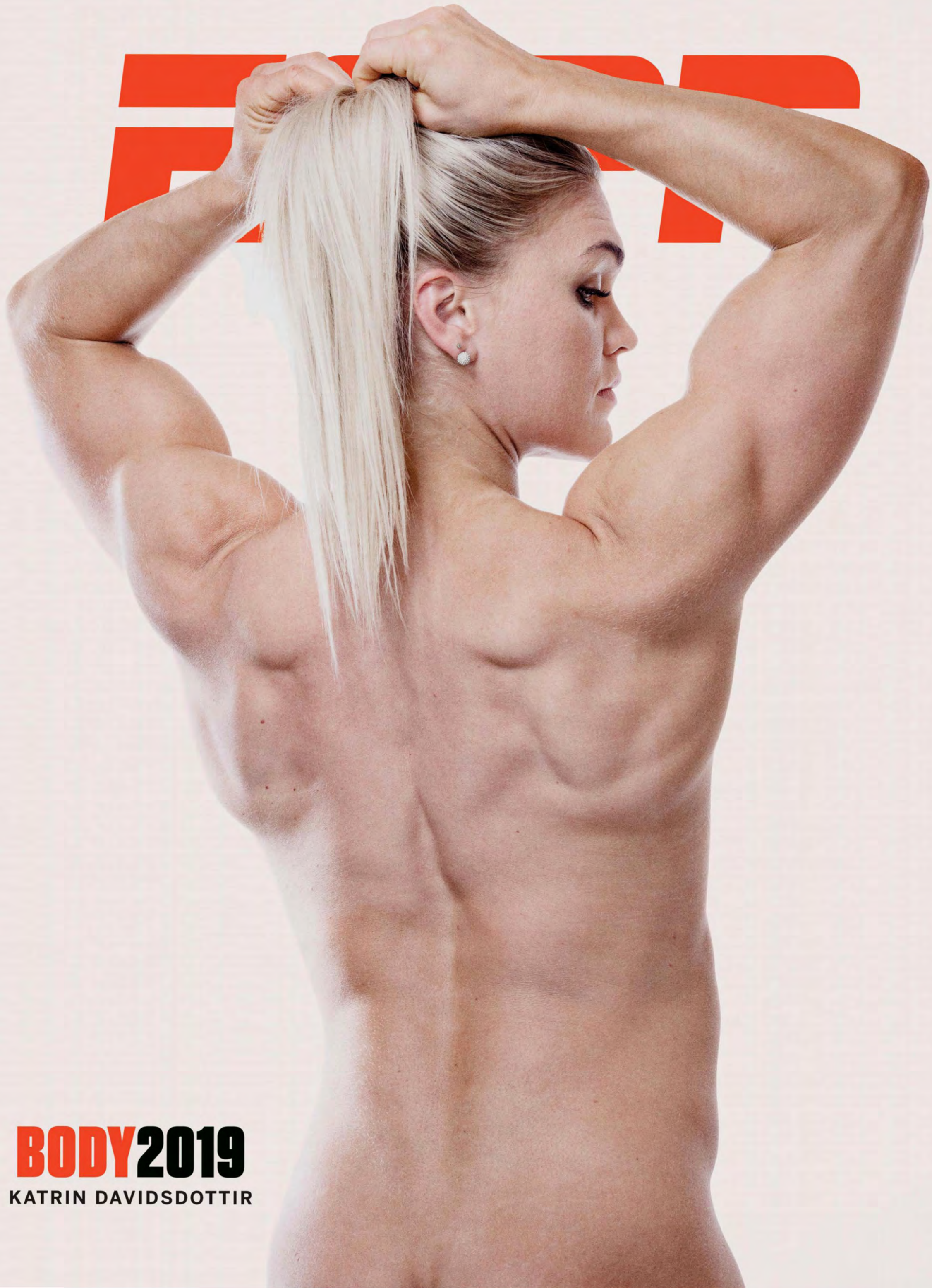
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BODY2019
CHRIS PAUL

ESPN



BODY2019
ALEX HONNOLD



BODY2019
KATRIN DAVIDSDOTTIR

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BODY2019
BROOKS KOEPKA



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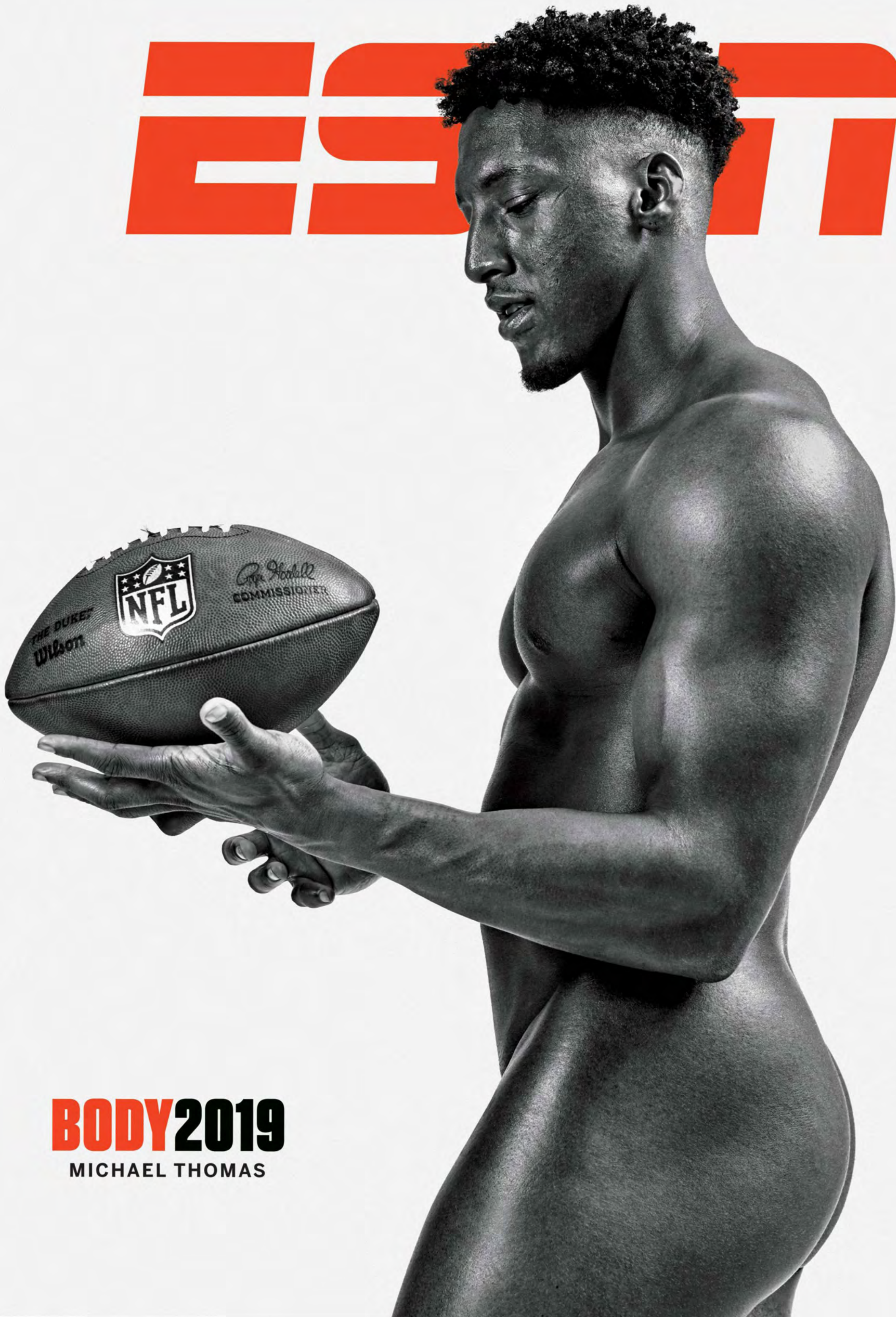
BODY2019
LIZ CAMBAGE

ESPN



BODY2019
MYLES GARRETT

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BODY2019
MICHAEL THOMAS

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BODY2019
CHRISTIAN YELICH

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BODY2019
EVANDER KANE

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BODY2019
SCOUT BASSETT

ESPN



BODY2019
AMANDA NUNES



BODY2019

EAGLES OFFENSIVE LINE

From left: Halapoulivaati Vaitai, Lane Johnson, Jason Kelce, Brandon Brooks and Isaac Seumalo

ESPN



BODY2019
KATELYN OHASHI

ESPN

BODY2019
JAMES HINCHCLIFFE



ESPN

BODY2019
LAKEY PETERSON



A full-page photograph of Nancy Lieberman, a woman with long brown hair, smiling and holding a basketball. She is unclothed, showcasing her muscular physique. The background is a bright, out-of-focus outdoor setting with sunlight filtering through trees.

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BODY2019
NANCY LIEBERMAN



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BODY 2019

BODY IS BACK! For 11 years, we've told the stories of the world's best athletes through their bodies. This year, we're sharing 17 more incredible tales.

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50 CHRISTIAN YELICH

To hit a baseball as well as anyone in the game, the Brewers' MVP candidate had to meld mind and body. **BY SAM MILLER**

56 SCOUT BASSETT

A decorated Paralympic athlete won't let her past—the loss of her right leg and years spent in an orphanage—be prologue. **BY TIM KEOWN**

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A six-time IndyCar winner's near-deadly accident changed him for the better—and it won't stop him from doing what he loves. **BY RYAN MCGEE**

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The WNBA standout is a burgeoning star, on the court and off. But to shine brightest, she must put her happiness first. **BY RAMONA SHELBURNE**

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The death-defying climber is used to putting his body on the line. Now he ascends into his toughest challenge: real life. **BY SETH WICKERSHAM**

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The NHL's most outspoken black star is done "walking on eggshells" when it comes to the league's diversity problem. **BY MARTENZIE JOHNSON**

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Twice the world's fittest female, the Iceland native is a shining example of her country's great legacy: strong women. **BY WRIGHT THOMPSON**

MAG RETROSPECTIVE

8 THE NEXT BIG THING A letter from our editor. **BY ALISON OVERHOLT**

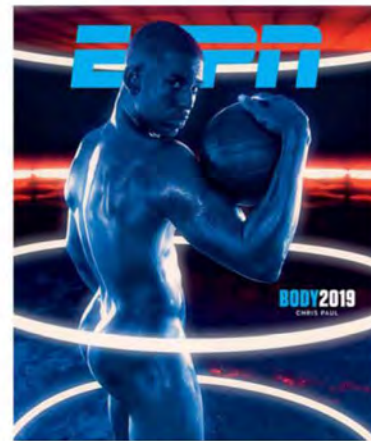
12 WHO'S GOT NEXT? For our last print issue, we revisit the four cover athletes from our first one. **BY STEVE WULF**

16 FROM NEXT TO NOW Through some of the most compelling photos in our history, here's a look at *The Mag's* enduring legacy: being first on what's next. [Well, most of the time.]



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Katelyn Ohashi wants to bring joy back to gymnastics—and to her Body shoot.



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Glam Squad

When it comes to Body shoots, every hair has to be in place—and we’re talking *every single hair*. The person who’s been keeping everything in check for the past five years? Makeup artist and groomer extraordinaire Erin Svalstad.



Cleaning the NL MVP’s foot?
Just another day at the office.

How many athletes have you groomed and glammed up over the years?

25! My first athlete for Body was rugby player Todd Clever in 2015.

Who’d you work with this year?

I worked with Liz Cambage, Katelyn Ohashi, Scout Bassett, Lakey Peterson, Michael Thomas, James Hinchcliffe and Christian Yelich.

What does your job entail on set?

I start every shoot by saying to the athlete, “We are going to be best friends.” I will do the hair, the makeup. I will shave them. I will put oil and lotion on them. I will be there with a towel to cover them up when they are done. I am going to make them feel as comfortable as possible.

Let’s be real, what’s it like to “groom”

some of the most elite athletes?

Let me get candid: I’ve only had to get really up close and personal with one athlete over the years. I had to shave *everything*!

What’s the most common item you bring to Body photo shoots?

Probably my bags of oils and dirt.

A bag of oils and ... a bag of dirt?

Yep! You never know what type of

vision the photographer is going to have. Some like the athletes dripping in baby oil. Some just want some dirt.

What’s the most memorable moment from working on Body shoots?

Working with Scout Bassett. She is the most inspiring human being I’ve ever met. She left a mark on my heart. That was a really inspiring day.

Meet the Body Issue Writers



Sam Miller

“You could hit a home run and not know why,” Christian Yelich said. At first, it sounded like a shrug, but I soon realized it was my story’s thesis statement. PAGE 50



Tim Keown

Whenever I’m tempted to type “courage” to describe an athlete, I’ll think of Scout Bassett and her unbelievable story—and then choose another word. PAGE 56



Ryan McGee

I’ve covered motorsports for 25 years, but the racers still manage to surprise me. Add James Hinchcliffe’s honesty about his injuries to that list. PAGE 78



Ramona Shelburne

Watching Liz Cambage juggle her All-Star commitments, I thought of another star I followed at the height of her fame: Ronda Rousey. PAGE 86



Seth Wickersham

What drove Alex Honnold to free solo El Capitan? His feats are so perilous and insane that he leaves that open to interpretation. PAGE 108



Martenzie Johnson

Evander Kane represents a history of black players stepping up and speaking out. He embodies a spirit of wanting to live in his own skin. PAGE 128



Wright Thompson

For a week in Reykjavik, I treated the hotel bistro like my living room, interviewing subjects there and soaking up the Icelandic culture. PAGE 148

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Meet the Body Issue Photographers

What do you get when you pair 21 star athletes with 17 world-class photographers? Body Issue magic.



Peggy Sirota

on Myles Garrett

Shooting in the middle of the desert in Joshua Tree, California, in June was no joke. It felt like 200 degrees that day. But

Myles stood there with a smile on his face, doing whatever it took to get the golden shot. PAGE 30



Dana Scruggs

on Katelyn Ohashi

Shooting for the Body Issue a second year in a row, I got the opportunity to push my work further than I ever have, concep-

tually. Katelyn's expressive fearlessness made the images stronger than I even imagined. PAGE 38



Rob Daly

on Brooks Koepka

Mother Nature can always present challenges, especially in Florida. Most of shoot day was overcast. But at one point on the golf course, the clouds parted, and it was like the heavens opened up for the perfect shot. PAGE 44



Joe Pugliese

on Christian Yelich

When shooting Yelich, I wanted to play with the idea of dreams. Shooting in a nondescript space, we were able to play with the

idea that in a dream, we can fly, we can be in water, we can go to an alternate space. PAGE 50



Richard Phibbs

on Scout Bassett

Over the course of my career, this shoot will stand out as one of the most inspiring and memorable. Although small in stature, Scout's

life force is huge. She is brave and full of courage, and that was evident in every single shot. PAGE 56

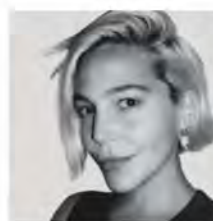


Gary Land

on Chris Paul

The vision for this shoot came down to three words: masculine, modern, heroic. My mind immediately jumped to a

futuristic space, utilizing LED tubes and hoops to create the illusion. CP3 was game for it all. PAGE 66



Heather Hazzan

on Kelley O'Hara

The entire shoot was powered by Kelley's positive, vivacious energy. It was her brilliant idea to shotgun a cold beer for the

last shot of the day, inspired by her post-World Cup celebrations. What's better than that? PAGE 72



Mark Williams + Sara Hirakawa

on James Hinchcliffe

On Body shoots, privacy is always a concern. At the Indy Speedway, we tried our best to shield

James from unwanted eyes—especially when the museum's tour buses came through! PAGE 78

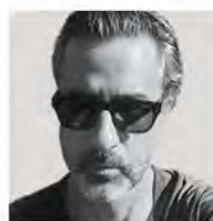


Sophy Holland

on Liz Cambage

Before the shoot, I sat down with Liz and went over the mood board to give her a sense of what to expect. Within seconds, she had

screamed in excitement. I nearly went deaf, but I loved her immediately and got to work. PAGE 86



Peter Hapak

on Michael Thomas

There's no denying Michael's strength and commitment at everything he does. At the shoot, he gave me his all. He was

running, pushing heavy equipment on the rooftop, training tirelessly, just to get the shot! PAGE 96



Marcus Smith

on Amanda Nunes

Nerves are inevitable at a nude shoot. But when Amanda held her two title belts over her body, they acted as shields—shields

that gave her extra confidence and power. The nerves settled, and she wowed us all. PAGE 102



Cory Richards

on Alex Honnold

I first shot Alex over a decade ago. Shooting him this year, I was able to dive into his character

on a new level. Plus, it's not every day that you tell your friend to get naked and curl into a ball for the shot. PAGE 108



Sarah Lee

on Lakey Peterson

I felt pretty bad as I was putting on my thick wetsuit, just when Lakey was taking off all her

clothes before plunging into the 50-degree water. The shoot was all about mind over matter that day. PAGE 120



Marcus Eriksson

on Evander Kane

Turns out that buckets of heavy synthetic ice plus two assistants in one small, old elevator up to the shoot location ... don't mix.

Thankfully, everyone was safe, but rattled, after the elevator got stuck. PAGE 128



Ramona Rosales

on Nancy Lieberman

It's always wonderful to work with strong women, and Nancy was no exception. The majority of the shoot had to be photographed

in darkness because of the lighting effects at play. Nancy quickly adapted to all the elements. PAGE 136



Andrew Hetherington

on the Eagles' offensive line

When my crew and I arrived to the shoot, we all sported matching Hawaiian shirts with Eagles logos all over them—you

know, to get in the spirit. Quickly after, I admitted to the players that I was a Giants fan. PAGE 142



Benedict Evans

on Katrin Davidsdottir

The shoot in Iceland was a dream. Partly due to sleep deprivation but mainly because every shot fell into place—at least, it did

after the grueling work that went into dragging equipment across rivers and mountains. PAGE 148

• HERE'S TO •
THE SHOT TAKERS

THE RULE BREAKERS THE ORIGINATORS

THE ALL NIGHTERS THE CREATORS

THE CHASERS THE HUSTLERS

THE FOUNDERS THE INNOVATORS

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



The Next Big Thing

WHEN **ESPN THE MAGAZINE** burst onto the scene 21 years ago, the swaggering declaration that our four original cover stars were Next was as much about calling our own shot as it was about bestowing the label on those young athletes.

From Day 1, the vision was clear: Game stories were (literally) yesterday's news, and game-action images were supporting material only. This magazine was all about offering fans insider access and incomparable insight into the lives and stories of the very real people behind the scores and stats we all follow so obsessively from season to season. The impact was immediate. As a new generation of athletes—from LeBron and Serena to Brady, Phelps and Tiger—claimed dominance, so too did *ESPN The Magazine*. In our two-plus decades, we've won the National Magazine Award for General Excellence (our industry's best picture Oscar) three times, earned *Folio's* first-ever Magazine of the Year accolade in 2018 and garnered literally hundreds of written and visual journalism awards over the years. In the process, we claimed the largest audience of any magazine in the country and set the standard for a generation of sports media.

A big part of the fun was embracing the creative playground of our format, crafting story packages that meant the physical turn of a page would surprise and delight a reader every time. The oversized pages of this magazine made photographs POP. And our covers. Oh, the covers: Michael Jordan's farewell in 1998—and the Derek Jeter farewell cover that echoed it in 2014. Ricky Williams in that

wedding dress in 1999. Ninja, our very first esports athlete, on the cover and reverberating through the culture just last year. Every single Body cover, but especially the very first one: Serena Williams.

There came a time, however, when the format itself began to limit. Franchises born on these pages, from Next to World Fame 100 to Heroes to Body, found their greatest impact across digital and social, their stories brought to life best by the combined power of words and images, video and interactivity across all our platforms. We found ourselves itching to release big stories not on an increasingly arcane publication schedule but when a story was ready and needed to be out in the world. And advertising moved out of print and into other spaces. With all of that in mind, we made the difficult decision to end the printing of *ESPN The Magazine* with the issue you hold in your hands.

Still, while endings are always bitter-sweet, the punctuation mark on the end of *The Mag's* print run brings freedom and excitement too. The commitment to deeply reported and powerfully told magazine-style journalism at ESPN continues—now with the full flexibility to publish those pieces when timing and relevance demand them. The editorial “events” we have become known for will continue as well, but with the unconstrained opportunity to imagine what those ideas need to be, across every platform ESPN touches.

Next month—a full 692 covers and 961 cover athletes after that very first issue we published in 1998—we embrace our mis-



Kevin Durant, Aly Raisman, Nick Bosa: the faces of our franchise issues.

sion anew with the launch of ESPN Cover Story. Inspired by those most impactful magazine pieces, our biggest story each month will feature signature photography and the creation of an original ESPN poster-style cover, along with both long-form written and television pieces, produced at the highest level. And it will all travel across ESPN TV shows, social channels and on the ESPN App in true cover-story fashion—the featured athlete's story will own the day. Sound utopian? Fantastical? A little hard to imagine just yet? So was the creative vision of *ESPN The Magazine* two decades ago. That world didn't yet realize that sports media was ripe for reimagining, but when we did it, we set the bar for the whole industry to follow. Our challenge now is no more and no less, so we're calling our shot here, today, as we did then: We got Next.

With gratitude for the privilege of having begun my editing career at this magazine, and for the honor of leading this team these past three and a half years,

A. Overholt

ALISON OVERHOLT

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THE SCENT

THE NEW MEN'S FRAGRANCE BY
KENNETH COLE

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ESPN The Magazine: The Final Credits

What's your favorite *Mag* story ever? That's the excruciatingly hard question we put to our staff. Their answers ...

1 “How They Do in Oxford,” an essay by Kiese Laymon [Oct. 26, 2015] on Ole Miss football and the stains of the Confederacy, gives me chills every time I reread it for how daringly it embraces uncomfortable truths, both personal and political.

2 “Ode to the Girl on a Wheel,” by Nikky Finney [Oct. 31, 2016]. Look, we printed a freaking poem, a testament to the ways we experimented with storytelling. This line still rattles in my head: “... the lanky girls, who uncrossed their legs, who rode by emancipated on their wheels ...”



3 “The Mismatch,” Tom Friend’s Tommy Morrison story from our first issue [March 23, 1998], because it served notice both to *Sports Illustrated* that they had competition, and to young writers [like me] that there was a home for the ambitious stories we dreamed of writing.



4 The reporting in “The Enablers of Larry Nassar,” by John Barr and Dan Murphy [Feb. 5, 2018], revealed to the world secrets that too many were hiding. Commissioning illustration for sensitive topics is always tough, but Mark Smith gave me his best here. I was proud to work on this one.

5 Dan Le Batard’s cover profile of Kimbo Slice [June 2, 2008], who, if you were to believe the internet, was a terrifying backyard brawler but in reality was a man simply fighting to bring himself up out of homelessness and grow as a human being.

Vice President, Editor in Chief, ESPN The Magazine
Alison Overholt

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6 Steve Wulf’s essay following 9/11 [Oct. 1, 2001] is still the most moving piece we have done. His words reminded us that heroes had always been among us and that with time we could, and had to, move forward.



7 I loved the photo feature in which we asked athletes to re-create classic album covers [Feb. 18, 2013]. I had just started my career here, and it was incredibly exciting to be working on such a smart concept.

8 “Blaze of Glory,” by David Fleming [Sept. 30, 2013]. The Packers were saved from ruin by the insurance money collected after their training facility burned down in 1950. Aaaaand ... they might have torched it themselves. One part whodunit, one part history lesson, Flem examined the NFL’s present through a little-known event in its past.

9 “Revis, Party of One,” Mina Kimes’ Darrelle Revis profile [Aug. 31, 2015]. Revis was always an intriguing player to me as a Jets fan, and I felt like Mina’s story gave me far more insight into him as a person.



10 “The Secret History of Tiger Woods,” by Wright Thompson [May 9, 2016]. Tiger’s real-life saga is better than any scripted sports drama ever. Right when we were thinking “what’s next,” Wright unearthed something special from the past that blew all of us readers away.



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Generation Next

Two decades ago, we predicted that the four athletes who appeared on our first cover would lead their sports into the next millennium. Kobe, A-Rod, Kordell and Lindros more than justified our faith. And, like us, they're not done yet.

By Steve Wulf

SEEMS LIKE YESTERDAY.

There they stand, four young men in black, posed against a white backdrop: Kobe, Alex, Kordell, Eric. Above their heads is a gold ESPN logo, and above that, at the top of the page, PREMIER ISSUE. The date in the lower left hand corner reads March 23, 1998.

But it's the red cover billing on that very first issue that speaks the loudest: *Next*. With a period. End of sentence.

From the perspective of today, there is a bittersweet irony to that word. This is the last regular edition of *ESPN The Magazine*: October 2019. And while staff members past and present are naturally wistful about the end of an era, we're also grateful for the opportunity to have taken readers on a voyage around the sports world. In many respects, we're lucky: Back in the spring of '98, the futures of our Next Four were far more assured than ours was. Had you told those of us who were there for the launch that we wouldn't pull into port for another 21½ years, we would have thought you were crazy.

As for the four men we thought would lead their sports into the next millennium, well, they more than justified our faith, putting up numbers as oversized as we were and distilling the most from their careers. And since that was then and this is now, we asked the original Gen Next to take a look back at that first issue.

"OH, MAN, I have a full head of hair," Kobe Bryant says one morning from his offices at Granity Studios in Newport Beach, California. "And I like that I'm standing next to Alex. I only knew who Alex was at the time, but we became good friends over the years."

The profile of Bryant written by Tom Friend in that issue is prescient: "He is 19, and he has a book to read, and he has a BMW to drive, and he has a floppy hat to

wear, and he has a generation to carry, and, well, he wants the job."

That he did. Bryant won five NBA titles for the Lakers and two gold medals for Team USA, became the first guard in NBA history to play 20 seasons, made 18 All-Star teams, scored 81 points in a 2006 game against the Raptors and 33,643 for his career. He retired in 2016, which means he'll enter the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2020.

His life is not without fault. Depending on one's perspective, he has or has not paid an appropriate price for a well-documented transgression. But at the end of the day, he has two retired numbers (8 and 24), four daughters, ranging in age from 16 years to 3 months, a 2018 Oscar for Best Animated Short (*Dear Basketball*), an ongoing relationship with ESPN (the *Detail* series), as well as Kobe Inc. and Granity Studios, which is producing an animated series (*The Punies*) and publishing young adult novels. Oh, and he coaches his 13-year-old daughter Gigi's AAU basketball team.

In that original story, Bryant quotes the ancient philosopher Plutarch: "Those who are serious in ridiculous matters will be ridiculous in serious matters." Friend also describes Kobe getting out of his BMW

when he sees a kid with KB8 Adidas and telling him, "Nice sneaks, how's your game?"

That desire to reach out remains in evidence. "I'm tremendously proud of my basketball accomplishments," Bryant says. "I want to be remembered as a player who did everything he possibly could to succeed and ended up overachieving. But I want my true impact to be on the players of today. I hope they see me as a North Star."

Those who have seen Gigi play say she has the Mamba Mentality. "She has her heart set on UConn," Kobe says. "Geno Auriemma has been incredibly nice to her, and the players treat her like their little sister." But for now, Kobe's next order of business is to start editing the second book in Wesley King's Wizenard series, which is about a group of young basketball players who come under the spell of a mystical coach, Professor Rolabi Wizenard.

Each of the chapters in the first book, *Training Camp*, begins with one of Wizenard's Plutarchian proverbs. The one above Chapter 3 reads, "The past is a gift. It reminds you there is a future."

IT'S AUG. 4, and Alex Rodriguez has good reason to feel jet-lagged.

After working a game at Fenway Park the week before, he had flown to Israel with his fiancée for a concert Jennifer Lopez was giving in Tel Aviv—his fiancée and J-Lo are, of course, one and the same. "Not the usual way to go from Boston to New York," he says. "But what a fantastic trip."

Now sitting in the broadcast booth with daughters Natasha, 14, and Ella, 11, as he prepares to do this week's Red Sox-Yankees *Sunday Night Baseball* game from Yankee Stadium, A-Rod takes a look at that first cover. "Girls, look how skinny your father was." Natasha takes a photo of it with her





ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC HEINTZ

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES; BRIAN BAHR/GETTY IMAGES; BRUCE BENNETT STUDIOS/GETTY IMAGES;
MARK J. TERRILL/AP PHOTO; INSET OPPOSITE PAGE: PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES PORTO

OCTOBER 2019 ESPN 13

phone. When he leafs through the issue and sees who wrote his profile, he chuckles. “Timmy wrote this? I forgot.”

The byline is that of Tim Kurkjian, who today provides commentary for *Monday Night Baseball*. They now have similar jobs on back-to-back nights, although Rodriguez has 696 more homers than Kurkjian. Here’s what the latter wrote back then: “The date of birth must be a typo: 7/27/75. Someone who is so often compared to the best shortstops in history, who says all the right things, who does so many great things cannot possibly be only 22.”

Rodriguez was only two years removed from perhaps the best major league season by a minor in history: .358, 36 homers and 123 RBIs. He would help revolutionize the shortstop position. “That’s one of the things I’m proudest of,” he says. “The three of us—Derek [Jeter], Nomar [Garciaparra] and myself—took the position even beyond what Ernie Banks and Cal Ripken had done.”

As a shortstop for the Mariners and Rangers, and then a third baseman for the Yankees, Rodriguez was a 14-time All-Star, a three-time MVP and a World Series champion (2009). He finished his 22-year career with a .295 average, 2,086 RBIs, 3,115 hits and those 696 blasts. His numbers look an awful lot like those of Willie Mays.

But that won’t be his baseball legacy and A-Rod knows it. He will always have an asterisk around his neck for his use of performance-enhancing drugs, which led to his suspension for the 2014 season. Unless there’s a dramatic, empathetic swing among Hall of Fame voters, Rodriguez will be shut out of Cooperstown, the way Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens and Mark McGwire have been.

“I made a terrible mistake,” he says, “and I have to live with it. But I also have a wonderful opportunity to make amends, to show my girls you can learn from your mistakes.

“Look at them, laughing over there. *That’s Next.*”

KORDELL STEWART HAS a few minutes before he heads off for practice. He is helping the quarterbacks at North Atlanta High School, where his son Syre is a junior. “He’s Little Slash,” Kordell says. “Cornerback/scatback. Playing quarterback would be a little too

much pressure for him and me, so we’re not going down *that* road.”

Stewart has always had a complicated love/hate relationship with the position. Even though the New Orleans native played quarterback for the University of Colorado, the Steelers drafted him in the second round in ’95 with the intention of making him a wide receiver. But Pittsburgh coach Bill Cowher noticed Stewart’s arm and his running ability and his vision. He gifted him with the nickname Slash and then, before the ’97 season, the QB job.

Kordell responded by leading the Steelers to an 11–5 regular-season record and the AFC championship game, throwing for 3,020 yards and becoming the first quarterback to run for two TDs and pass for three in the same game twice.

That’s why he made that first cover, which he’s looking at as we speak. “Kobe and A-Rod, wow. That’s quite an honor,” Stewart says. “I’m not a hockey guy, so I don’t know much about Eric Lindros. Goalie, right?” Uh, wrong, but when told that Lindros was a forward who’s in the Hockey Hall of Fame, Kordell says, “I didn’t have their longevity, but I am proud of my role in the evolution of the quarterback. Look at all the mobile quarterbacks in the NFL now.”

In the first issue, writer Rick Telander poses the question of why Stewart had to wait three seasons to become an NFL QB: “Who knows?” Stewart says now—as if we don’t.

Stereotypes are even harder to outrun than opposing defenses, and they caught up to him the very next season, when the Steelers didn’t make the playoffs. In *Truth*, Stewart’s 2016 autobiography, he describes a particularly ugly scene after a game in Pittsburgh. “As I walked off the field and into the tunnel,” he wrote, “someone threw a cup full of beer at my head that gushed into my eyes. I looked up. A man looked me dead in the eyes and yelled, ‘N-----!’”

Stewart walked away. Somewhere in the back of his mind was the Edgar Albert Guest poem “See It Through.” He had memorized it growing up and took comfort in the words “You may fail, but you may conquer/ See it through!”

Three years later, he had his best season, throwing for 3,109 yards and rushing for 537 more as the Steelers went 13–3 in the regular



Our first four have had notable second acts: Bryant as a publisher, Rodriguez an analyst, Stewart a high school coach and Lindros an advocate for concussion awareness.

season and beat the Ravens 27–10 in their AFC divisional game. In the AFC championship game against New England, Stewart almost brought the Steelers back from a 21–3 deficit, but they lost 24–17 to the eventual Super Bowl XXXVI champs. “That hurt,” he says. “The Super Bowl was in New Orleans. My father would have loved it.”

That season was pretty much his last hurrah. He lost his job to Tommy Maddox the next year, then got actually slashed by the Steelers. Subsequent stints with the Bears and Ravens didn’t work out. He became a football analyst, co-hosted a radio talk show, appeared with soon-to-be-ex-wife Portia Williams on *Platinum Weddings* and worked on his golf game.

In the summer of 2015, Stewart found himself at the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton for the induction of friend and teammate Jerome Bettis. “I loved being a Steeler,” he says, “but that weekend, I was reminded of what I didn’t like about it. Dan Rooney, the Steelers’ owner and a lovely man, was there, and I went over to him to pay my respects. He didn’t recognize me at first, but then I bent down to his eye level. He smiled and said, ‘Kordell! You know, if you had just stayed at wide receiver, you might be here too.’”

For now, Stewart is content tending to his business interests, raising his son as a single parent and teaching the high school QBs how to play the position. And now it’s time to go to practice.

One more thing. Does he still remember the poem?

He laughs. “When you’re up against a trouble ...” When he finishes 24 lines later with “See it through!” he laughs again and says, “How’s that?”



“PRETTY GOOD COMPANY.”

So says a 46-year-old father of three young children, who owns a lumber mill and still plays recreational hockey. He is sitting in the Toronto offices of the NHL Players’ Association, for which he also works, and looking at the 25-year-old Eric Lindros. “Kobe, A-Rod, Kordell and me. I didn’t realize the importance of the cover shoot at the time. What’d I know? I was just a kid from London, Ontario.”

Lindros was actually the most established of the four. His nickname was “The Next One,” a play on “The Great One,” Wayne Gretzky. The pressure to be a superstar had started to build. As Dan Shaughnessy wrote in his Lindros profile, “The game is hard enough without folks carving your face into hockey’s Mount Rushmore before you’ve skated a shift as a professional.”

He was big and fast and something of a lightning rod, thanks to his refusal to play for the hapless Quebec Nordiques, who had drafted him in 1991. So they had to trade Lindros to Philadelphia, where he and his Legion of Doom linemates (John LeClair and Mikael Renberg) became the most feared offensive force in hockey. Before he made our cover, he had already been named team captain (’94), won the Hart Trophy as league MVP (’95) and taken the Flyers to the ’97 Stanley Cup Final, which they lost to the Red Wings.

But just as our first issue was going to press, Lindros was crossing the blue line in Pittsburgh when he glanced down after losing the puck in his skates and got blasted by defenseman Darius Kasparaitis. In the showers after the game, he became disoriented, thinking he had been traded.

“I want my true impact to be on the players of today. I hope they see me as a North Star.”

KOBE BRYANT

That was the first concussion. Over the next two seasons, he suffered at least five more. Flyers general manager Bobby Clarke accused him of being soft, but Lindros had every reason to be concerned: His younger brother, Brett, had to quit the game after two seasons with the Islanders because of concussions. The end of Lindros’ Flyers career came in Game 7 of the 2000 Eastern Conference finals when Devils defenseman Scott Stevens used his left shoulder to blast Lindros in the head. As Lindros lay on the ice, true hockey fans began to realize that the game itself had to come to its senses.

After sitting out the next season, Lindros was traded to the Rangers, and he seemed to pick up where he left off: 73 points in 2001-02. But he wasn’t really the same, and after brief stints with the Maple Leafs and Stars, he knew what all good hockey players are trained to know—it was the end of his shift. He had to get off the ice. After he did, he donated \$5 million to the London Health Sciences Centre to study brain trauma.

Still, as great a player as he was, Lindros

might have a greater impact on the game now as an advocate for concussion awareness and safer play. “That’s what I want my legacy to be,” he says. “That’s why I’d like to see body contact eliminated in hockey below the age of 15.”

It took Lindros longer than it should have to get into the Hockey Hall of Fame, but he finally made it in 2016. “I’m fortunate beyond measure,” he says. “I’m happier than I’ve ever been. [My wife] Kina and I have the kids, I get to work at the timber mill with my dad, and a few times a week I play shinny with a bunch of old pros at the local rink.

“And every time, I’m reminded of what a great sport hockey is. Without the hitting.”

AND SO WE come to the end of our shift. After 7,829 days, 693 covers and countless moments of pride, we’re putting the regular issue to bed for good. Granted, it’s only the end *on paper*. We will continue to produce stories for ESPN’s many platforms, scanning the horizon for our audience as we always have. Still, we wish to thank our readers, the powers-that-be that let us be, and the many talented people we’ve worked with over the years. We also need to express our gratitude to the many athletes who tolerated our requests and allowed us to bring them into your homes.

In *Dear Basketball*, Kobe says, “I’m ready to let you go,” then counts down the final seconds on an animated scoreboard clock. That brings to mind the very real scoreboard we had when we published the magazine in New York. It was there to remind us of the time remaining before deadline. Five, four, three, two, one ...

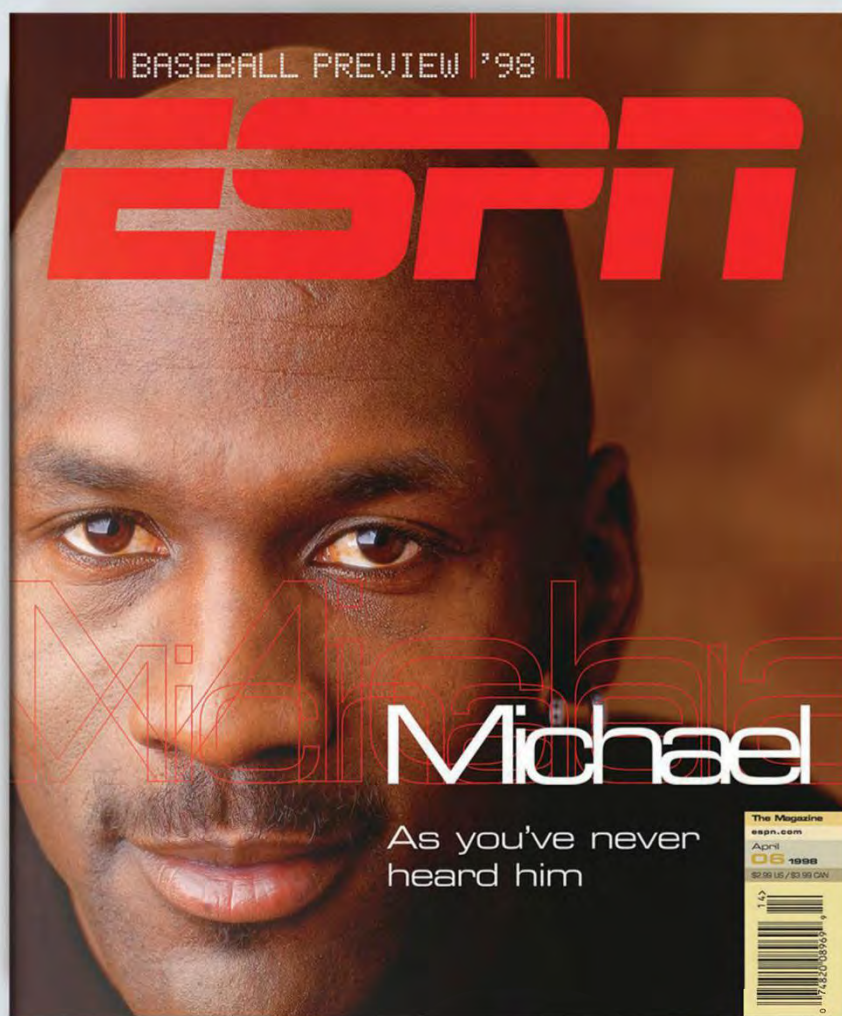
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FROM NEXT TO

4/6/98

MICHAEL JORDAN

APPEARED ON THE MOST COVERS (8) IN THE FIRST DECADE OF THE MAG (THREE IN '98, TWO IN '99, TWO IN '01, ONE IN '08)



4/20/98

TIGER WOODS



HIT In 1997, Tiger claimed his first Green Jacket. A year later, all we could talk about was whether he'd claim another. Now, 22 years later, we're still asking the same damn question. Have we truly not advanced as a species?!

4/20/98

RYAN LEAF

MISS "In 2018, Ryan Leaf, not Peyton Manning, will be ... in Canton." Yes, we actually wrote that!



5/4/98

PHIL JACKSON

FIRST COACH ON THE COVER



JACKSON REMEMBERS ...

"It must have been one of my favorite photographers that talked me into this shot. Yes, I meditate, but really, a photo shoot?"

11/30/98

ELTON BRAND

FIRST COLLEGIATE ATHLETE ON THE COVER



BRAND REMEMBERS ...

"I remember doing pushups to try to get my muscles to pop out. I was 18 or 19 and it was said I still had baby fat."

7/27/98

GABRIELLE REECE AND MIKE O'MALLEY

FIRST WOMAN AND FIRST ACTOR ON THE COVER



REECE REMEMBERS ...

"I got a lot of calls on that one. It was all my guy friends calling. 'I saw you!' I knew what magazine they saw me on. They're not looking at *Harper's Bazaar*."

O'MALLEY REMEMBERS ...

"Being on the cover was awesome. I put it in a frame to hang up. Right now it's in the garage. No offense. I don't have that big of an office."

5/18/98

TIM DUNCAN



HIT Post-MJ, *The Mag* hyped Tim as the NBA's next star. We = smart! Five titles, 15 All-Defensive Teams later, he's the top power forward of all time.

NOW...

“There is no path or recipe to greatness,” we wrote in our debut issue. “We simply know it when we see it.” Yeah, about that: We indeed saw a lot of greats coming the past two decades, from LeBron and Serena to Chloe Kim and Baker Mayfield. Scored a few notable firsts while we were at it, like making Ninja the first gamer on a national magazine cover. (We’ll say it: Kind of genius!) But regrets, we have a few of those too. Kaz Matsui: Really? Ryan Leaf: Seriously? Quadtrine Hill: Like, who? Here’s the thing, though: Even when we were whiffing wildly, we were having wild fun doing it. We hope you had fun along with us. So join us as we take one last ride through our 21-year history, one big swing at a time.

H HIT M MISS

3/8/99

JEFF GORDON
FIRST RACE CAR DRIVER ON THE COVER



GORDON REMEMBERS ...

“They definitely had a vision for this cover. And it was a vision that took a lot of effort on their part before it convinced me!”

11/15/99

KEVIN GARNETT



HIT We wrote that KG “speaks only when spoken to.” OK, so we sure got that wrong. But his skill set changed the NBA forever.

8/9/99

RICKY WILLIAMS



HIT Few trades resonated like the Saints shipping eight picks for Williams. The union fizzled three years later, but Ricky ... sizzled: 10,009 career yards and 66 TDs.

11/13/00

DESTINY'S CHILD

FIRST MUSIC GROUP ON THE COVER



9/18/00

MAURICE GREENE

FASTEST PERSON ON THE COVER



GREENE REMEMBERS ...
“There was no petting. I was told not to make any sudden moves. Just be there, get the shots and then get out.”

12/25/00

YAO MING
TALLEST PERSON ON THE COVER



ESPN THE MAG BY THE NUMBERS

TALLEST AND SHORTEST ATHLETES ON THE COVER

7-6

4-8

YAO MING

SIMONE BILES

6/11/01

VENUS WILLIAMS



HIT How much court has Venus crushed since her first Mag feature? Five singles majors and 10 doubles trophies alongside sister Serena.

11/12/01

DIRK NOWITZKI



HIT By 2001, Dirk—14-time All-Star and surefire Hall of Famer—was a poster child for why NBA teams needed bigger scouting departments.

12/24/01

TOM BRADY



HIT “Who knows what Brady will do for an encore,” we wrote after Brady replaced Drew Bledsoe. Well, we come from the future! And we know! Six rings, 70,514 passing yards, 517 TDs.

2002



8/19/02

SERENA WILLIAMS

HIT Boy, did we get this one right! We put Serena on our cover after she won her third major, and all she's done since is win another 20. The leader in prize money (\$90M) and Open-era majors, no woman athlete has graced our cover more. G-O-A-T.



12/23/02

LEBRON JAMES

HIT Even though you could watch him as a high schooler on PPV, LeBron surpassed all the hype we could hurl his way: 4 MVPs, 3 Finals MVPs, 9 Finals appearances, 3 NBA titles. Still, we ask ... whither the headband?



11/11/02

JIMMIE JOHNSON

HIT Back in 2002, Johnson just wanted to keep up with his mentor, Jeff Gordon. Then he passed him: seven championships and 83 wins. Boom, confetti!



6/23/03

DARKO MILICIC

MISS OK, so Milicic compared himself to a young KG in our feature. While it's not the best comp, Darko did win a ring in 2004.



3/31/03

MICHELLE WIE AND DIANA TAURASI

YOUNGEST ATHLETE (WIE, 13) AND FIRST WOMEN'S HOOPS STAR (TAURASI) ON THE COVER

TAURASI REMEMBERS ...

“I have one framed in my house. It's one of those iconic things where 20 years from now it'll be cool to be on that cover with those three women.”



7/21/03

ALBERT PUJOLS

HIT A gift from God? We stand by it. Sixteen years later, the three-time MVP is the sixth man to amass 500 homers and 3,000 hits.



12/22/03

KAZ MATSUI

MISS We named him “one of the top five shortstops on the planet.” Twenty-three errors in '04 later, he was moved to second.



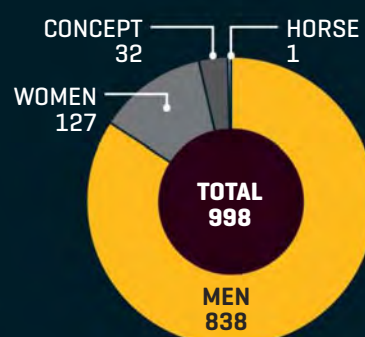
1/5/04

CARMELO ANTHONY

HIT In Melo's rookie year, we paired him with Jay-Z. Clever! One made music. The other, buckets.

ESPN THE MAG BY THE NUMBERS

WHO AND WHAT HAS BEEN ON OUR COVERS



ATHLETES ON THE MOST COVERS

LEBRON JAMES

12

KOBE BRYANT

9

CHRIS PAUL

9

MICHAEL JORDAN

8

BARRY BONDS

7



3/1/04

MICHAEL PHELPS

MOST DECORATED MALE OLYMPIAN ON THE COVER

PHELPS REMEMBERS ...

“As a kid who dreamt of winning a gold medal or being on the cover of a magazine, to see it actually come true, it’s just such a neat thing to look back on and appreciate now.”

4/26/04

LARRY FITZGERALD

HIT We boarded the Fitz train early, while there were still seats. Now he’s third in catches—and rising.

FROM THE STORY ...

“I told him, ‘You’ve got hands like Jerry Rice.’ Larry said, ‘What? I got better hands than Jerry Rice.’”

THEN-PITT DB
REGGIE CARTER



6/7/04

SMARTY JONES

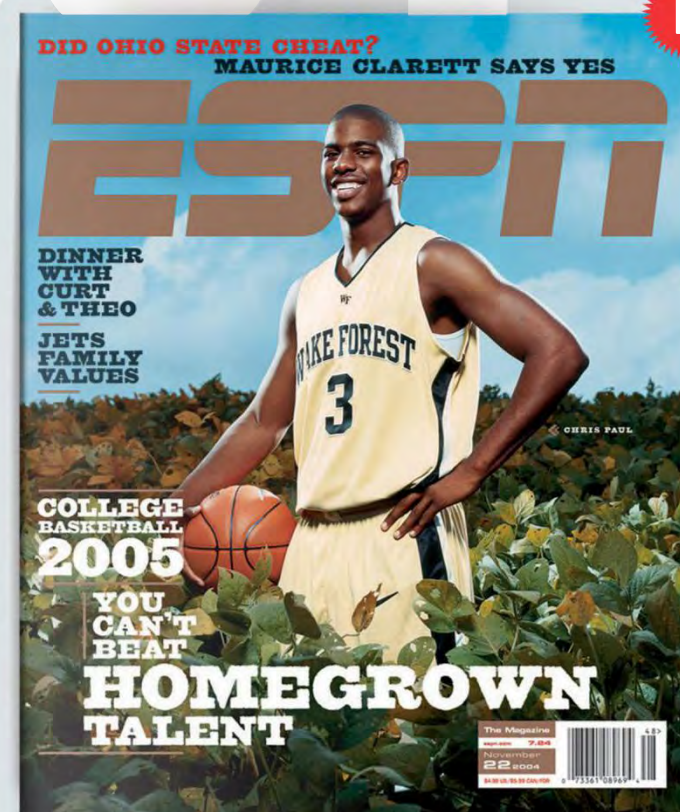
FIRST (AND ONLY) SOLO ANIMAL ON THE COVER



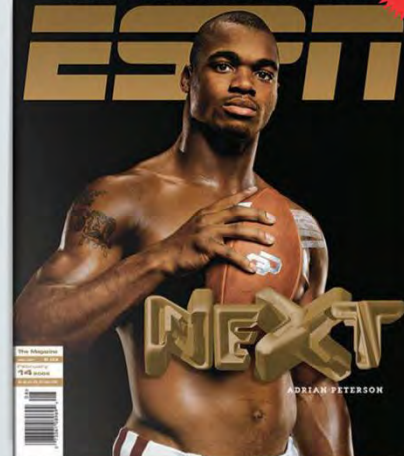
11/22/04

CHRIS PAUL

HIT After the first of his nine *Mag* covers, the point guard would be an All-American his sophomore year at Wake Forest. Now he’s naked in our last issue. Circle of life, people!



SUPER BOWL XXXIX: DREAMERS VS. SCHEMERS



2/14/05

ADRIAN PETERSON

HIT Named Next as an OU frosh, AP has made seven Pro Bowls and won the 2012 MVP after rushing for 2,097 yards.

ED REED DWYANE WADE VINCENT LECAVALIER



10/10/05

DANICA PATRICK

FIRST WOMAN RACE CAR DRIVER ON THE COVER

11/21/05

ALEXANDER OVECHKIN

HIT This one took a while. We watched the Caps lose in the playoffs year after year. But fear not! They won their first Cup in '18, and a joyous Ovi imbibed ... for weeks.



NFL Fantasy Preview // Wie Speaks // Twilight of The Boss

FROM NEXT TO NOW ...

9/12/05

STEWIE AND PETER, FAMILY GUY
FIRST CARTOON ON THE COVER



8/1/05

MAT HOFFMAN
FIRST X GAMES ATHLETE ON THE COVER

HOFFMAN REMEMBERS ...

“I don’t think any of us in action sports thought we would be on the cover of *ESPN The Magazine*. So everyone who saw it was like, ‘What the hell?’”

11/20/06

JOHN JOHN FLORENCE

HIT Who knew this Oahu native would, less than 13 years after this story, become one of the world’s best Pipe surfers, with back-to-back world titles. Oh right, we knew! So braggy!



H

FROM THE STORY ...

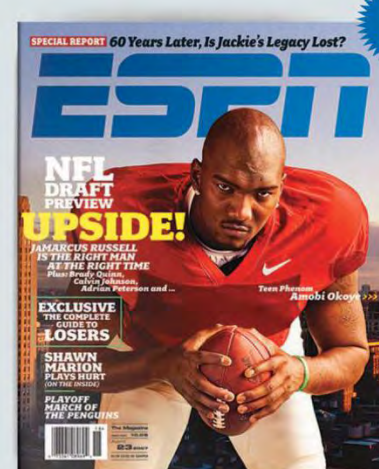
“He was a freak show. The best ever for his age.”

PETEY JOHNSON,
THEN-SURF TEAM MANAGER

4/23/07

JAMARCUS RUSSELL

MISS An impulse buy, we said, off a stunning Sugar Bowl. But his absurd physical tools lasted all of three NFL seasons in a career born of a holdout.



M

ESPN THE MAG

CAN YOU BELIEVE WE DID THIS 🐛 ?



07/17/17

To pee or not to pee? That was the question.

10/18/10

Poo waits for no player. So in the 2010 Body Issue, we went there.



11/20/06

KEVIN DURANT

HIT “Think T-Mac with midterms,” we wrote of the “6-foot-9 jumping-jack.” Astonishingly, that *undersold* KD. The only NBA players in history to match Durant’s career stat line of 27/7/4? Elgin Baylor, LeBron and Wilt.

FROM THE STORY ...

“Kevin is the best recruit we have ever had.”

THEN-LONGHORNS COACH RICK BARNES



H

ALL THE ELECTROLYTES*

ZERO
SUGAR



GET MORE OUT OF ZERO.

*Same electrolytes as regular Gatorade.
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2007

7/2/07
GREG ODEN



MISS Not one, not two ... but 15 titles. That's what Oden said he wanted. But with injuries ravaging his career, he appeared in all of 105 NBA games.

FROM THE STORY ...
"I wish I could say who is going to have the better career, me or Kevin Durant."

12/17/07
JOBA CHAMBERLAIN



MISS Joba allowed just one earned run in 19 games his first season. He was a sensation. But after those midges on the mound in Game 2 of the 2007 ALDS, he was never the same.

12/3/07
STEPH CURRY



HIT We knew he'd be good—the skinny guard shot 41 percent from 3 at Davidson. But two MVPs and three titles good? Not sure anyone saw that!

6/4/07
ROGER FEDERER



MISS We were hatin' just a bit in 2007 with this headline. And, of course, Fed showed us, winning the 2009 French to complete the grand slam.

06/16/08
AARON RODGERS



HIT Thus began Rodgers' reign as the best QB in the world: best passer rating in history, 338 TDs and just 80 INTs. Damn you, Brett Favre!

02/25/08
KEVIN LOVE



HIT We tabbed the UCLA big as a future '08 rook to watch. And since '08-09? Love is one of three players with 10,000 points and 7,000 boards.

5/21/07
CHUCK LIDDELL

FIRST MMA FIGHTER ON THE COVER

LIDDELL REMEMBERS ...
"It was a big sign for our sport of how far we'd come and where we were heading."



5/5/08
JERROD FIELDS (ABOVE) AND ANTHONY BURRUTO
FIRST AMPUTEES ON THE COVER

FROM THE STORY ...
"If we can adjust rules of sports to the time, why not for prosthetics? Create a panel of scientists and athletes, able-bodied and disabled, and ask them to determine what's fair."
WRITER ERIC ADELSON

6/2/08
KIMBO SLICE

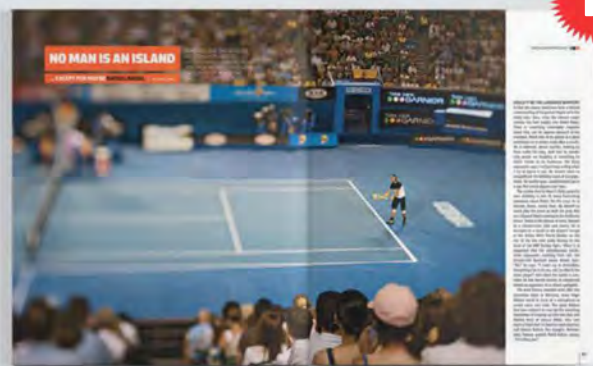


HIT An unsanctioned street fighter before his runs in boxing and MMA, Slice was a marginal talent. But in star power? Few could touch him.

FROM NEXT TO NOW ...



6/1/09
RAFAEL NADAL



HIT The Nadal we met was resistant to change. He'd dominated on clay, winning four straight French Opens. Since then: 14 majors, pan-surface. See, change is good!

FROM THE STORY ...

"It's important to understand this is only a game. I am lucky: My job is one of my hobbies."

6/1/09
LIONEL MESSI



HIT We called 2009 the Year of Lionel Messi a full six months before his first of five Ballon d'Or trophies. Who are we, Nostradamus?

11/2/09
PHIL IVEY
FIRST (AND ONLY)
POKER PLAYER ON
THE COVER



12/28/09
QUADTRINE
HILL



MISS Hill's [brief] football career led to ... a boxing career? We were excited! The results? Less so: just five wins.

8/10/09
USAIN BOLT



HIT The golden shoes, 9.69 euphoric seconds. It had been one year since Bolt's Beijing takeover. By the end of the 2016 Olympics in Rio, Bolt bid farewell to the Games, finishing with eight golds, world records in three distances and 11 world titles.

11/30/09
BLAKE GRIFFIN



HIT Griffin's rookie billing? Deliverer of *cover-your-head* dunks. And though he hurt his knee and missed the 2009-10 season, he became the 2010-11 rookie of the year and a six-time All-Star. Now he even shoots!

ESPN THE MAG BY THE NUMBERS

TOTAL NUMBER OF
ISSUES

514

TOTAL NUMBER OF
PAGES PRINTED

61,780

TOTAL AMOUNT OF PAPER
USED, IN POUNDS

662,512,295



4/5/10

RUSSELL WESTBROOK

HIT In which we profiled a polarizing young point guard who would go on to rewrite record books and become a polarizing less young point guard.

11/15/10

BRITTNEY GRINER



HIT Griner, a revelation on the court and off, still dominates nine years later, with a title, six All-Star appearances and two Defensive Player of the Year Awards.

12/13/10

ROB GRONKOWSKI

HIT His first Mag mention came alongside brothers Dan and Chris in a quiz that asked who knew their mom the best. Gronk may have three Super Bowl rings now, but he finished second on this test. Robbie, call your mom!



06/28/10

JOHN WALL

HIT We learned that the draft's presumed top pick wanted to play football, but it was too dangerous for his mom's liking. Five All-Star Games later, it looks like—natch!—Mom knew best.

12/12/11

NOVAK DJOKOVIC



HIT Djoker fixed his serve and won three grand slams in a season, capping it by chatting with icon John McEnroe in our Interview Issue.

4/18/11

JAKE LOCKER



MISS He comped to Steve Young. He was floated as a top pick. Odds were good! Until they weren't. Locker retired at 26 with a 9-14 record.

9/17/12

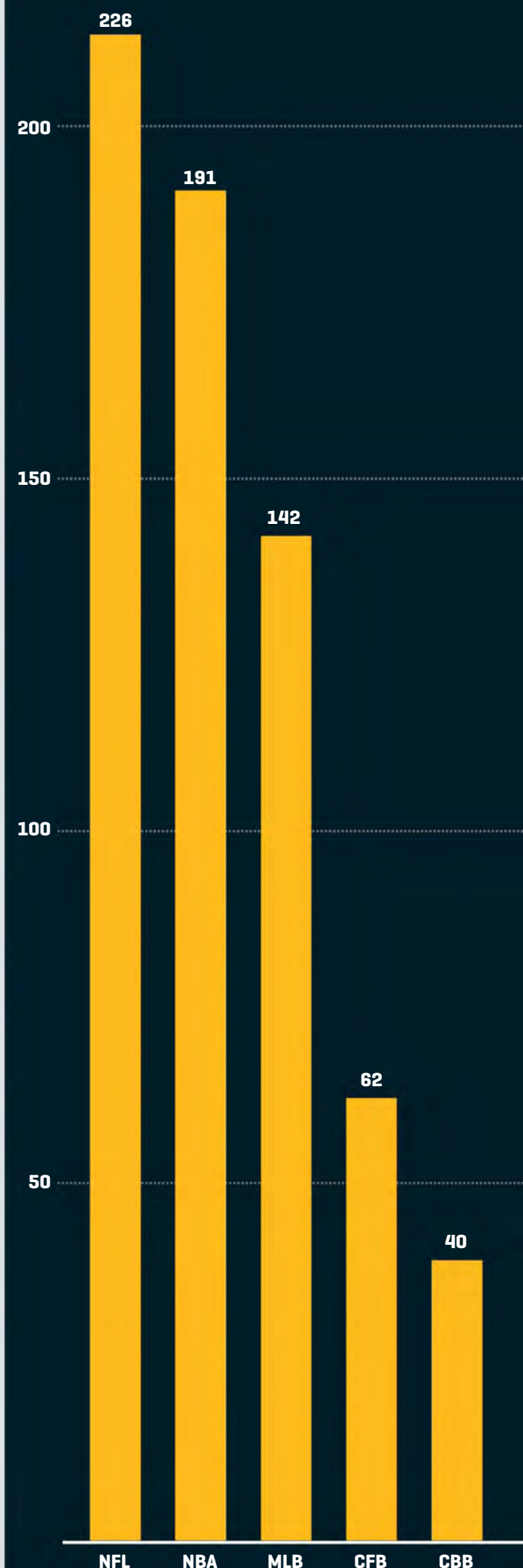
THE PACKERS



MISS Using AccuScore, we projected the Pack would go 16-0. They went 11-5 ... and AccuScore said we misused their metrics. Clearly!

ESPN THE MAG BY THE NUMB

SPORT APPEARANCES ON OUR COVER

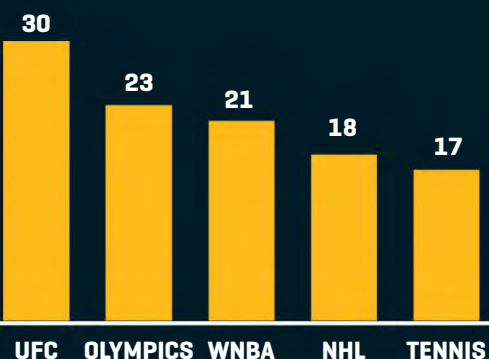


ERS

DID YOU KNOW ...
THE BILLS & JAGUARS
NEVER MADE OUR COVER?

DID YOU KNOW ...
6 VERY GOOD
DOGS
& 0 KITTY CATS
MADE OUR COVER?

DID YOU KNOW ...
ATHLETES FROM
SIX OUT OF SEVEN
CONTINENTS
MADE OUR COVER?
(SORRY, ANTARCTICA)



1/9/12
CAM NEWTON

HIT When we anointed Cam the obvious choice for Next, we called his talent “transcendent”—like a superhero?—following the most successful rookie season ever for a QB, with 35 total TDs in 2011. To date, the 2015 MVP is the only QB in history with 150 passing and 50 rushing TDs. And Superman? He only just turned 30.

FROM THE STORY ...

“I know I have the talent to change this game, and I don’t see no ceiling.”

7/23/12
RONDA ROUSEY



HIT Rousey, after posing in the Body Issue, spent years dispatching UFC foes in nary a minute. We loved it! Her fall, though, was sudden—like a kick in the face.

9/3/12
CALVIN JOHNSON



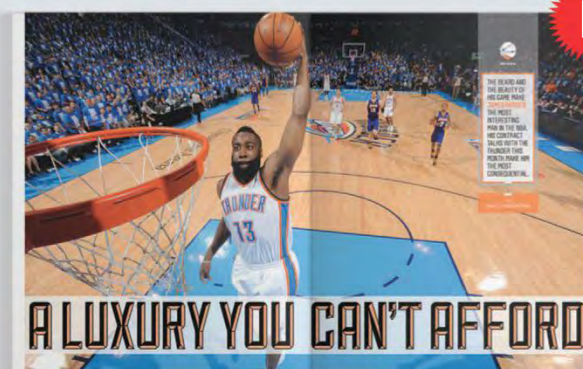
HIT After we marveled over Megatron’s “Magic Hands,” he used them to set the NFL’s all-time record for receiving yards in a season: 1,964.

10/1/12
MIKE TROUT



HIT The Millville Meteor was a mere 21 but mature beyond his years, amassing WAR faster than anyone else in the modern era. He’s, um, stayed good.

FROM NEXT TO NOW ...



10/29/12
JAMES HARDEN

HIT We called the Sixth Man of the Year the key to OKC’s future. Harden said: “The loyalty here is second to none.” Isn’t it ironic, don’t you think?

1/7/13
KYRIE IRVING



HIT Irving’s stardom was evident in Pablo Torre’s first Mag story, in which Kyrie opened his journals to us. Pablo declared Kyrie to be Next. But really, they’re both stars now!

3/4/13
MATT BARKLEY



MISS We used “metrics” to “prove” Matt Barkley was a franchise QB. He’s since started seven games. Data d’oh!

FROM NEXT TO NOW ...

7/22/13
GARY PLAYER
OLDEST PERSON
(AGE 77) IN
THE BODY ISSUE



9/1/14
PHILADELPHIA EAGLES
MISS RB LeSean McCoy was buying into Chip Kelly's system, becoming a "believer," we said. By late 2015, Kelly was gone. He went 2-14 with the Niners in 2016 and got fired again.



2/16/15
ADAM SILVER
FIRST (AND ONLY) COMMISSIONER ON COVER



FROM THE STORY ...
"I have talked to other commissioners about [gambling]. All of them have assigned people to study the issue intensively."



11/9/15
GUS KENWORTHY
FIRST OUT ACTION-SPORTS ATHLETE ON THE COVER

KENWORTHY REMEMBERS ...
"I still have kids tell me that that issue and that article is the reason they came out and why people told their parents they were gay, or why their parents accepted them being gay, or why they were able to feel comfortable with themselves."

3/30/15
JONATHAN LUCROY



MISS We bought high on pitch-framing—called Lucroy more valuable than Mike freakin' Trout. A bit of a stretchhhhhhhh.

8/31/15
INDIANAPOLIS COLTS



MISS We said the Colts would make the Super Bowl. They ... missed the playoffs. But c'mon! Andrew Luck was out for nine games!



FROM THE STORY ...
"The more players who come in with SPARKS FORWARD CANDACE PARKER



2016



H

05/23/16

BREANNA STEWART

HIT After her history-making turn at UConn, 2016 No. 1 pick Stewart entered the league and promptly was rookie of the year, then 2018 MVP.

higher skill sets, the more attention you can gain.”



H

11/28/16

KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS

HIT KAT's first cover dived into how a small-ball player in a big man's body could change the game for good. The ROY landed on the All-NBA third team in just his third season.

FROM THE STORY ...
“I don't limit myself. If my coach needs me to guard 1 through 5, I have worked tremendously hard to have the ability to do that.”

ESPN THE MAG OUR BON APPÉTIT MOMENTS!



3/27/17
It's PB&J all day in the NBA.



4/14/17
Mmm ... Seattle grasshoppers. Mmmmmmm ...



H

1/4/16

DESHAUN WATSON

HIT Clemson's hero graced our cover a week before racking up nearly 500 yards in a national title loss to Alabama. He got his revenge in 2017, then passed for 4,000 yards in the NFL in 2018.



H

10/3/16

ANTHONY RIZZO

HIT Curse? We don't know 'bout no stinkin' curse. A month after this cover story on Rizzo, teammate Jon Lester and their battles with cancer, the Cubs won their first Series in more than a century.



H

9/4/17

SAM DARNOLD

HIT Thirty-three TDs in his freshman season? Put that man on our cover! And Darnold rewarded our faith: No. 3 pick in '18—and enough buzz in Year 2 to have us ... believing in the Jets?

4/23/18

JOSH ROSEN



M

MISS Rosen was on a cover that read: “The Players That Define the Future of Sports.” Huh. He was traded after a year with the Cards and ... might not start this year.

5/7/18

TORONTO RAPTORS



M

MISS Kyle Lowry and DeMar DeRozan: ready for their title! A year later, sans DDR, the Raps won their title. So we were a year early? Can we do that? Cool, cool.

FROM NEXT TO NOW ...



2/19/18
CHLOE KIM
HIT We put the freestyle phenom on the cover prior to the Olympics and prayed she'd stick the landing for us. Nailed it!

4/1/19
NAOMI OSAKA
HIT Even as she grapples with the pressure of winning two majors, you simply can't take your eyes off her.



FROM THE STORY ...
“I wouldn’t be where I am without [Serena]. That’s a fact. She opened so many doors for tennis and especially for people of color.”

9/1/19
BAKER MAYFIELD
FIRST BROWNS PLAYER ON THE COVER

FROM THE STORY ...
“If you’re worried about being understood, you’re worried about the wrong things.”

12/14/18
SIMONE BILES
MOST DECORATED AMERICAN GYMNAST ON THE COVER

BILES REMEMBERS ...
“That [image] was about strength and power with a combination of beauty. Just showing how strong a female athlete can be.”



7/9/18
MEGAN RAPINOE AND SUE BIRD
FIRST GAY COUPLE ON THE COVER

BIRD REMEMBERS ...
“Celebrating athletes’ bodies is a wonderful thing, so I was just glad to be a part of that.”



10/1/18
NINJA
FIRST GAMER ON THE COVER

NINJA REMEMBERS ...
“I remember just being really, really, really frickin’ excited that no one knew this was coming.”



CHRONOLOGICALLY: MARC HAUSER (JORDAN); ROBERT SEBREE (MANNING AND LEAF); MARC HAUSER (JACKSON); JON GIPE (REECE); BARRON CLAIBORNE (BRAND); DARRYL ESTRINE (GORDON); DAH LEN (GARNETT); GREGORY HEISLER (WILLIAMS AND DIKTA); ISABEL SNYDER (GREENE); ANDREW ECCLES (MING); MARC BAPTISTE (FRANCIS AND DESTINY’S CHILD); SARAH A. FRIEDMAN (NOWITZKI AND MCGRADY); ROB TRINGALI (BRADY); GEORGE HOLZ (WILLIAMS); MICHAEL O’BRIEN (JAMES); MARC BAPTISTE (WILLIAMS, MILBRETT, TAURASI AND WIE); CHRISTIAN LANTRY (JOHNSON); BUTCH BELAIR (MILICIC); JEFF SCIORTINO (PUJOLS); GREGORY HEISLER (MATSUI); PHIL MUCCI (ANTHONY AND JAY Z); BUTCH BELAIR (MILICIC); GREGORY HEISLER (JONES); JIM FISCUS (PHELPS); SARAH A. FRIEDMAN (FITZGERALD); SARAH A. FRIEDMAN (PAUL); CARLOS SERRAO (PETERSON); ANTHONY MANDLER (PATRICK); CHRIS BUCK (OVECHKIN); TM@2005 FAMILY GUY AND TCFFC ALL RIGHTS RESERVED (FAMILY GUY); SASHA EISEMAN (HOFFMAN); RICHARD FOULSER (FLORENCE); SANJAY KOTHARI (RUSSELL); PHILIP TOLEDANO (FOOTBALL TOILET); PETER YANG (DURANT); CHRISTOPHER KOLK (ODEN); PHIL MUCCI (CHAMBERLAIN); ROBYN TWOMEY (LOVE); MARLA RUTHERFORD (LIDDELL); CARLOS SERRAO (FIELDS AND BORRUTO); NADAV KANDER (SLICE); LANDOV (BOLT); ART STRIBER (IVEY); RAMONA ROSALES (GRIFFIN); RENNIO MAIFREDI (HILL); MATTAIS CLAMER (WESTBROOK); LUIS SANCHIS (GRINER); JAMES DIMMOCK (WALL); ALAN CLARKE (DJOKOVIC); ALAN CLARKE (LOCKER); MATTIAS CLAMER (PACKERS); FINLAY MACKAY (NEWTON); PEGGY SIROTA (ROUSEY); PATRIK GIARDINO (JOHNSON); PATRIK GIARDINO (TROUT); PETER HAPAK (IRVING); PETER HAPAK (PLAYER); WARWICK SAINT (MCCOY); PETER YANG (SILVER); PETER HAPAK (KENWORTHY); NATHANIEL WELCH (LUCROY); DYLAN COULTER (WATSON); DYLAN COULTER (WNBA 20); PETER YANG (TOWNS); DWIGHT ESCHLIMAN (PB&J); JONATHAN LEVINSON AND JOHN LOK (CHAPULINES); PETER YANG (RIZZO); DYLAN COULTER (DARNOLD); PETER YANG (ROSEN); MARCUS ERIKSSON (RAPTORS); RAMONA ROSALES (KIM); MARK WILLIAMS & SARA HIRAKAWA (OSAKA); DANIELLE LEVITT (BILES); RADKA LEITMERITZ (RAPINOE AND BIRD); BENEDICT EVANS (NINJA); PETER YANG (MAYFIELD)

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BODY 2019

For 11 years, the Body Issue has showcased the world's greatest athletes—the muscles, skin, features and scars that make them who they are. What we've learned: Every body has a story. From a WNBA star's journey to self-acceptance to a race car driver's recovery from an unthinkable accident, here are 17 more incredible ones.

Myles Garrett presents ... Body 2019!





MYLES GARRETT

DEFENSIVE END, CLEVELAND BROWNS
2017 NO. 1 OVERALL DRAFT PICK,
2018 PRO BOWLER
AGE 23
6-5, 273 POUNDS

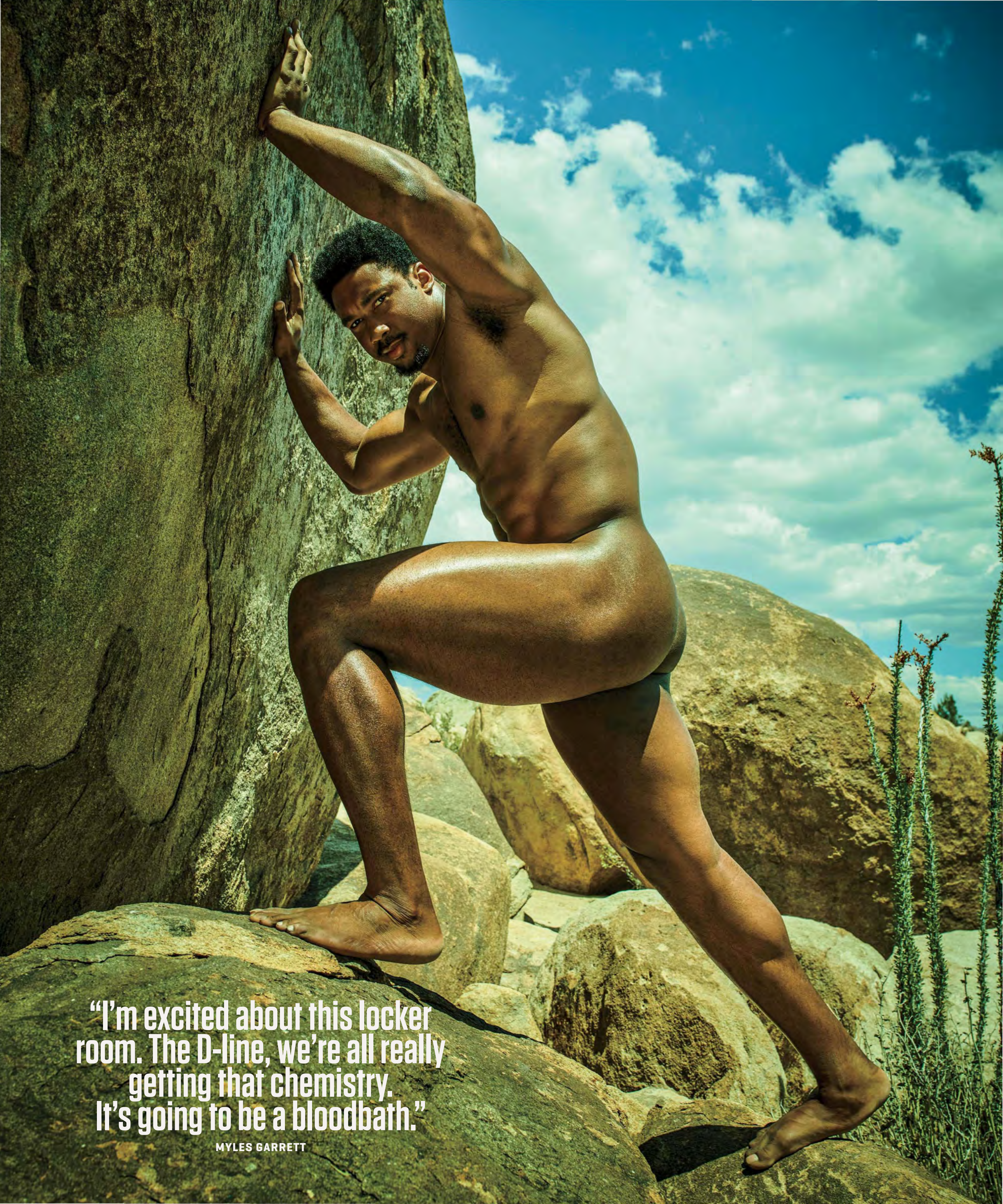
I want to look like a Grecian god. I'm always striving for more. I want to be at my best physical appearance just to know that I'm using all the God-given abilities that I have. **I used to look at classic bodybuilders like Lou Ferrigno or Arnold.** I know that's probably not obtainable for me and it's probably not going to be functional on the field, but those kinds of things inspire me because that's the peak of physical appearance. **But if you don't want to look like that, whatever is comfortable for you, whatever makes you happy, I say do it.** Life's short. If you want to eat cake, if you want to eat Cinnabon, if you want to eat pizza, I'm there with you. I'll sit down there and eat with you. **A lot of people make comments on my biceps, but my dad gave me those.** It was natural for me. But I had to work on the stomach and chest. That didn't come naturally. My brother used to call me a bird chest. This took a lot of pushups. —AS TOLD TO MICHELLE BEISNER-BUCK

Photographed by Peggy Sirota on June 1, Joshua Tree, Calif.

PRODUCTION BY STEVE BAUERFEIND/BAUIE PRODUCTIONS; GROOMING BY SAMANTHA FRYLING/ART DEPT.

BODY
2019





“I’m excited about this locker room. The D-line, we’re all really getting that chemistry. It’s going to be a bloodbath.”

MYLES GARRETT

BODY 2019



“In high school, I wanted to be a hooper. Then the football team had our first scrimmage and a guy came across the middle and I lit him up. I was like, ‘I kind of love this.’”

MYLES GARRETT



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BODY 2019

KATELYN OHASHI

GYMNAST
2018 NCAA TEAM CHAMPION WITH
UCLA, 10-TIME ALL-AMERICAN,
2011 JUNIOR NATIONAL CHAMPION
AGE 22
4-10, 110 POUNDS

I started gymnastics when I was 3.

When I became an elite gymnast, everything became less about me. The Olympics was the goal, but it was never my goal. I believed the medals were worth more than I was. **At 14, I started hearing comments about my weight.** I had a horrible relationship with food. There were times I couldn't get through a floor routine because I was so exhausted. I'd fall, and my coach would be like, "What's wrong with you?" I'm like, "All I've had today are raspberries." They looked at me like it wasn't an issue. **I got injured at 16, and it was such a relief.** I'd been so miserable for so long. It took a full year for me to miss gymnastics. I found my passions outside the sport. I got a full social experience and a better environment to accept my body. That's when I changed my path to college gymnastics. **When my routine went viral in January, what stood out was the joy.** For the past two years, we've heard how gymnastics is abusive. But it isn't. It was the culture. The video helped people see the beautiful side. **Now I feel accepting of the things I was insecure about.** I have gone through eating disorders and body shaming, and here I am today, doing this shoot for millions of people to see.

—AS TOLD TO STACEY PRESSMAN

Photographed by Dana Scruggs on April 30, Los Angeles

SET DESIGN BY WARD ROBINSON/WOODEN LADDER;
MAKEUP BY ERIN SVALSTAD; HAIR BY SAISHA
BEECHAM/ARTISTS MANAGEMENT; PRODUCTION
BY LIZ KOMROY/3 STAR PRODUCTIONS; MOVEMENT
COACHING BY VALORIE KONDOS FIELD





BODY
2019



**“I have a skin condition called granuloma annulare.
I used to feel ashamed. But now I feel it’s important to
show it because so many people try to hide it.”**

KATELYN OHASHI



THIN LINE

BY KATELYN OHASHI

A LINE OF DOTS following a pattern but one stands out,
it's clearly an outlier that's direction needs to reroute.
alienated and put to the side in order to not be seen,
studied through a screen,
thinking that maybe if we can match a name to it, we'll all suddenly become immune like any vaccine.
experiencing anything that isn't explained or doesn't belong to the majority will make you alone,
and anyone who wants to stay "normal" will hide in order to not be shown.
the outlying dots were marked on my skin,
to remind me that being different is no longer sin.
these marks are the reminders of everyone fighting around.
the ones that are no longer seen because they were cast down.
the ones that aren't lost just never wanted to be found.
and the ones that just needed someone else to make a sound.
multiple mediums where too many negative energies can surface.
as if not commenting the hurtful message would somehow be doing a disservice.
each time my skin sheds away making more room to grow.
not to make room for anyone else but to let my own true colors show.
proud of who I am and what my body reveals,
no longer am I concerned about who it appeals.
too thin, too fat,
but it's not anyone else's job to decide all that.
having a voice loud enough blocks everyone else out,
but when there's that lingering doubt every compliment received will go unnoticed like a drought.
amour de soi is the only natural form of self-love.
once that's reached, nothing will rise above.
we weren't meant to have it all, but make the best out of what we have every single day.
I'm proud of my body and all its imperfections, that's all I have to say.

BODY 2019



BODY 2019

Find more photos,
behind-the-scenes moments
and interviews at
[ESPN.com/bodyissue](https://www.espn.com/bodyissue).





BROOKS KOEPKA

PGA TOUR GOLFER
WORLD NO. 1, TWO-TIME U.S. OPEN
AND PGA CHAMPIONSHIP WINNER
AGE 29
6-1, 187 POUNDS

In the last five, 10 years, you're starting to see a lot of different athletes playing golf. Fifteen years ago, we saw John Daly drinking Diet Cokes on the golf course, doing whatever. Now you look at how talented some of these guys are, and they look like they could go and fit in any sport. **I feel like I really took advantage of the last two years.**

I saw the way everybody else treated their diets, the way they work out, and really just made a conscious effort of, "Hey, you know what? If I really want to be the best in the world and I want to be one of the top guys in our sport, I need to figure out what I can improve." **In 16 months, I went from a guy who had won one PGA Tour event to all of a sudden I've got three majors.** You know, I was kinda learning on the fly a little bit. I've sometimes been a little standoffish, and I had to learn that maybe you don't have to play the tough-guy role. **But if other people had done what I had done, their face would've been on the dollar bill or Mount Rushmore.** Everyone's got their favorite players—the media, the fans. Which is fine. But at the end of the day, it's about, "How many majors have you won?"
—AS TOLD TO TOM RINALDI

Photographed by Rob Daly on March 20, Palm City, Fla.

PRODUCTION BY KIM MCENIRY/OVERFLOW
PRODUCTIONS; SET DESIGN BY SEAN O'BRIEN;
GROOMING BY ALAINA DEBERNARDIS

“On the course, you see this very intense, non-smiling person. But I’m very laid-back, very chill. I could laugh and joke with you for hours.”

BROOKS KOEPKA





“When somebody tells me I can’t do something, I’m very eager to go out and do it. Even if it’s me telling myself, ‘You can’t win this golf tournament.’ I want to prove to myself that I can.”

BROOKS KOEPKA



CHRISTIAN YELICH

OUTFIELDER, MILWAUKEE BREWERS
2018 NATIONAL LEAGUE MVP,
TWO-TIME ALL-STAR
AGE 27
6-3, 195 POUNDS

Photographed by Joe Pugliese
on July 25, Milwaukee

GROOMING BY ERIN SVALSTAD; SET DESIGN
AND PROP STYLING BY DAN GRIFFIN;
PRODUCTION AND LOCATION SCOUTING BY
NICK LANGHOLFF



SWING THEORY

BY SAM MILLER

AT THE 2018 midseason break, Christian Yelich was a 26-year-old first-time All-Star with numbers very similar to those he had been putting up every year of his six-year career: a .292 batting average, 11 homers, 43 RBIs, .823 OPS. In the first game of the second half, he had three hits, and since that day, he has been the best hitter in the world, with an OPS that is almost a perfect match for Babe Ruth's career and a home run rate that's considerably better. From that pretty good first half he went on to win the MVP award. From the one All-Star break to the next, he led all of baseball in average (by nine points), homers (by 13!) and RBIs (by 27!!), a hidden triple crown. He is now more likely than not to make the Hall of Fame.

This is the era of the swing-change superstar: A mediocre player woodsheds his swing with an unconventional hitting guru, tearing down and rebuilding his mechanics piece by piece until he's reborn as an out-of-nowhere power-hitting stud. That's not Yelich's story. Yelich can tell you what he changed at the All-Star break, but he still struggles with the question of why he changed it, and he certainly didn't know anything like this was going to happen. For him, hitting was, and is, a matter of timing, of slowing the game down, baseball's favorite mantra. But in retrospect, his breakout is still mysterious, because so much of hitting—especially during the most crucial microseconds—is insanity.

IN 1927, WHILE barnstorming through Northern California, Babe Ruth sat with a San Francisco newspaper writer to talk about hitting. "I couldn't explain the secret of it to you if I wanted to," Ruth said. "A lot of times, I never see the ball. That's right. Look at me funny, but I tell you—lots of times when I sense the ball is coming in a certain place, I just close my eyes and swing."

Most baseball takes place in bursts of 400 milliseconds, from when the pitcher releases the ball until it reaches the front of the plate. We perceive the world about 80 milliseconds behind reality (roughly how long it takes a visual signal to travel to our frontal lobe), so for the batter, the 400 milliseconds get cut down to closer to 300. The final 150 milliseconds, furthermore, are too late to be useful: A Japanese study in 2016 had hitters wear special glasses that would go dark at different points of the pitch. The hitters whose glasses obscured their vision 150 milliseconds before the pitch reached the plate were no worse than batters whose vision wasn't obscured at all. (And as the ball approaches the plate, it travels about six times faster than eye muscles can track and leaves the hitter's field of vision entirely.) So the hitter has perhaps 150 milliseconds to recognize the pitch, determine its speed and spin, forecast where and when it will arrive at the plate, and direct his body through a complicated three-part physical sequence that will, in theory, connect a small sweet spot of a 3-foot rod with a ball that the batter can't actually see. It takes normal people, in lab conditions, about 700 to 800 milliseconds to identify a pitch.

If you think about this task, it becomes impossible. Literally. In 2012, researchers at Columbia University measured electrical activity in hitters' brains as they tried to identify pitches. The research concluded, according to an article in *Frontiers in Neuroscience* titled "You Can't Think and Hit at the Same Time," that the batters who made the wrong decisions showed more activity in their frontal cortex. That's the part of the brain at work when you consciously deliberate on something—coffee or tea, Hawaii or Las Vegas. Batters who made the right decision showed more activity in the fusiform gyrus, an area in the temporal lobe that plays an important role in object and facial recognition.

"They are athletic geniuses in every sense of the word. This is cognition at its peak," says Jason Sherwin, one of the Columbia researchers and now CEO of deCervo, a startup that developed a training application called uHIT to help hitters recognize pitches more quickly. But of the decision to swing or not swing, he says, "I think it's a

non-deliberative choice. As you try harder, you're screwing up the process."

In the moments when baseball is happening, hitters become, essentially, spectators. It would be a stretch to call the decision to swing free will, because it isn't free will when you recognize a face you know on a movie screen. You can't will it; it just happens.

And so, to get back to Christian Yelich, this is the dilemma: The game moves too fast, but trying consciously to slow it down is counterproductive. To beat those 400 milliseconds means mastering every part of the process leading up to it and then taking a leap of faith.

ON THE OFF-DAY before the second half began last year, in the Brewers' clubhouse at Miller Park, Yelich sat at his locker with a tablet and watched old video of himself crushing balls. He wanted to remember what crushing a baseball felt like.

The clips Yelich watched were from summer 2016, when he was still a Miami Marlin, and the memories he was drawing back on were from July 3 of that year. He and the Marlins were in Fayetteville, North Carolina, to play a Sunday night game against the Braves at the Fort Bragg military base. After visiting a parachute packing facility and touring the Army post earlier in the day, Yelich corralled the Marlins' hitting instructors, Barry Bonds and Frank Menechino, for soft-toss drills. It was 91 degrees in Fayetteville, and they were in a makeshift tent that wasn't air-conditioned.

Cage sessions between Yelich and his coaches were often tense, even without North Carolina heat. Menechino's soft tosses came fast, to replicate the decision speeds of game pitches. He designed drills to be competitive, and he talked trash to add to the pressure. Sessions would sometimes end abruptly. Menechino and Bonds always wanted to go step-by-step, reinforcing the small successes along the way; Yelich wanted to see the whole picture all at once. They wanted to work on mindset; he wanted to work on mechanics. They also thought he was a better hitter than he did and wanted him to do things he didn't think he was strong enough to do.

Yelich had been in the Marlins organization for six years. Raised in Westlake Village, California, half an hour north of Malibu, he hadn't come from an intense baseball background. His mom and dad had never played the game, and he had no rooting passion for either LA-area franchise. (He would become a fan of the Yankees, and particularly Derek Jeter.) When he was 7, he tried to quit baseball because he didn't like getting hit by pitches, but his mom bribed him to stick with it.

His swing—a level left-handed stroke that drew comparisons to that of Mark Grace, one of the great opposite-field hitters of the 1980s and '90s—came naturally to him. A sense of belonging at higher levels often didn't. He worried about being demoted back to the minors long after that was a realistic threat. Yelich—more friendly than charismatic—is often described as humble, and he comes by that humility genuinely. It sometimes manifests as risk aversion. He has a tendency to reflexively reject unsolicited observations and advice.

His Marlins coaches knew he had more power than his home run totals showed; they could see it in batting practice and in how hard he hit grounders. Yelich sort of knew it too, but change was risky. (And, to be fair, nobody thought he had Babe Ruth kind of power.) "He was scared to death," Menechino says. "We said, 'Trust us. Keep on the path. You'll never get it right away.' He didn't understand how good a hitter he was going to be. We all knew."

On this day in July 2016, Yelich's coaches were hammering him about the need to "swing down," timeworn hitting advice that was increasingly mocked by progressive hitting coaches as unsuitable to the modern game. The "launch angle" movement was taking hold around the league. A number of prominent veterans had rebuilt their swings to elevate more balls and take advantage of MLB's suddenly lively baseball. In this era, Yelich stood out: He hit the ball hard but mostly on the ground and frequently to the opposite field, wasting his natural power. This wasn't by design. It was just how he hit—partly his swing, partly his timing. He tended to hit pitches "deep"—over the plate instead of out in front. He could pull inside pitches,

but if the pitch was middle or middle-away, he would carve it to the opposite field. Yelich was regularly asked why he couldn't just hit more fly balls and take advantage of his power. He was sick of that question. Hitting a baseball is hard enough, he said, and trying to hit "up" could backfire spectacularly. "If you're not strong enough," he said in 2016, "launch angle is not your friend."

Still, swinging down? Weird advice for one of the world's most dependable ground ball hitters. But the drill wasn't about his actual swing plane. It was about his mindset. "Everybody has an upswing," Menechino says. "Nobody actually swings down. It's just perception. That drill was about shortening up his path, getting that elbow close to the body, not going around the ball, getting short to it."

So Yelich swung "down" at these hard soft tosses, and things started clicking. He attacked balls on the outer half and got to them out in front of the plate, where he could elevate them. He was arguing with his coaches—"Swing down? I'm hitting backspin fly balls!"—but they just kept repeating it: Keep doing it, keep doing it. "You find this mindset, and it's coming off the bat like it really hadn't for me before," Yelich says. "Your body doesn't actually do what your mind thinks, but it's a way to get there."

That summer he had the first real power spike of his life, and he came to realize he'd been late on pitches his entire career. Not so late that he couldn't be successful—he was good enough at every other baseball skill that he could be a borderline All-Star as a ground ball hitter—but too late to get to a contact point where he could hit for power. "Timing is a very hard thing to teach," Menechino says. "You can show him how to get ready to hit, but to teach that timing? It's almost impossible." It can only be found, and Yelich briefly—but fleetingly—found it.

Then he lost it. He had another solid but unremarkable 2017 campaign and was traded to Milwaukee—by his childhood hero, Derek Jeter, he likes to point out—as part of a Marlins fire sale. In 2018, he found himself in a pennant race for the first time.

So that's what he was thinking about when he watched the video the day before





the second half in 2018: How can I regain that feeling? How can I get my timing right, to where I'm hitting the ball in front of the plate instead of deep into my swing?

He went to the cages at Miller Park. On something of a whim, he tried standing more upright, his feet closer together, hands a little higher, shoulders squared. This was how he'd swung in high school, so it wasn't a foreign swing. When he entered professional ball, he had changed his swing to be more spread out, lower, in part because it made it easier for him to recognize the much faster pitches that he was seeing for the first time. Now, though, he'd been a major leaguer for six years. He'd seen thousands and thousands of such pitches. He was better at thinking through the sequences that pitchers were likely to use against him. And he was calmer at the plate—there wasn't so much blood rushing to his head anymore.

So he stood more upright. With that, he found that his load—the precommitment stage when the batter draws back and collects energy—put him in a position to pause, for a fraction of a second, before attacking the ball. He was slightly earlier, balanced and ready to stride toward the ball. Balls weren't getting deep; he was hitting them out in front. This changed the trajectory of his batted balls.

Perhaps more important, though, this new load allowed him to feel—mentally, subconsciously, in the milliseconds when his fusiform gyrus was doing the pattern-recognition work to determine whether he could hit a pitch—that more pitches seemed hittable. Here is perhaps the most telling thing that happened after the 2018 break: He started swinging at far more pitches early in counts. In the first game of the second half, he had three one-pitch at-bats (lineout, double, triple), as many as he'd had in the entire month of April. He had as many first-pitch hits in that first three-game series as he'd had in the two months before the All-Star break. He went from one of the more passive first-pitch swingers in baseball in the first half to one of the most aggressive. This was, he swears, an entirely unintentional change; it was just the result of being in a position to pull the trigger. He never chose that as a strategy. This was not



**“Over your career,
you start to understand
and listen to your
body more, when you
can push harder or
you’ve got to back off.
You learn to manage a lot.”**

CHRISTIAN YELICH



his frontal cortex. His brain was choosing it for him.

He admits this all may sound like “insanity,” but he abides by one rule of hitting: “It doesn’t matter how good your swing is or what pitch you swing at. If you’re not on time, you can’t hit it.” As he kept tinkering in the next few weeks, he found more and more confidence attacking pitches in all parts of the strike zone. He especially swung more frequently at pitches away, which is where he gets pitched most frequently and which is where he had most often (but no longer) sliced hard ground balls. He was now hitting those pitches better than he ever had, turning the pitchers’ plan of attack into his strength. He pulled more balls, hit more balls in the air, pulled more balls in the air. He denies trying to do any of that, exactly. “He’s on autopilot,” Menechino says approvingly. “He doesn’t have to feel for it.”

Some players have rebuilt their swings piece by piece, deliberately, but for Yelich it required the opposite. When he stared directly at the problem—too many ground balls, not enough fly balls—he doubted himself. “I accidentally stumbled upon something that really helped me,” he says.

The hitting coach texted his former pupil a few weeks into the second half: “Are you starting to believe you’re a Guy now?” “I don’t even understand what’s happening right now,” Yelich replied. “But I believe it.”

THERE IS A fairly common feeling humans get called High Places Phenomenon. It’s the rush of anxiety you might have at the top of a high building, or driving along a mountain pass, that despite your conscious longing to stay alive you will suddenly jump over or veer off. It’s a fear that the parts of your brain that you don’t believe you control will start driving you.

This must be what it’s like to be a wildly successful hitter yet to suddenly feel the despair that your brain—the part of it you can’t control—is going to rebel and fail you. Hitting is an act of faith, and faith in any context is constantly challenged, always wavering.

When Yelich is standing in the on-deck circle or walking to the plate, he sometimes

gets a feeling, a *you’ve got absolutely no chance right now* kind of self-doubt. “It just leaves you,” he says, “it” being the feeling of control over the most consequential moments of his life. “I don’t know why. The first time it happens to you, it scares the s--- out of you.” Sometimes that lasts one at-bat. Sometimes it lasts for weeks. “And then, eventually, it sounds stupid, but it’s one swing—whether that’s in BP, or the on-deck circle, a groundout in a game, a hit, and you’re just like, ‘Oh, there it is.’ It comes and goes, just like that. That’s why it’s so maddening. It drives people in baseball insane.”

In the end, there is only so much a hitter can rely on with eyesight. And only so much he can control outside that: He can refine his swing until it’s automatic. He can study his own failures to understand how pitchers are going to attack him. He can prepare for each individual matchup so he can anticipate what pitch will be thrown, and he can learn to process sequences in the 15 seconds between each pitch so he can send simple pre-pitch cues to his subconscious. He can learn how to distract himself when he’s in the on-deck circle and blood starts to rush to his head. He can slow everything down, but then the pitch comes, a pitch he sees for 150 milliseconds, and the hitter can only turn within himself, to a faith that what he has done before he can do again.

Sometimes, Yelich gets the opposite of the “there’s no way I can ...” feeling: The game seems like it’s in slow motion. But that feeling passes too, and eventually he has to deal with the bad one again—even now, after more than a year as the best hitter in the world. “I know this,” Babe Ruth concluded in that 1927 interview: “A man can’t worry and hit home runs.”

Yelich has been through it before, dozens of times. Now he can slow the game down. He can take a deep breath. He can distract himself with the plan he settled on before the game for attacking this pitcher and remind himself that the feeling is not real. He can avoid the paradox that drives so many players insane—the one where trying harder makes you worse. He can tell himself, somewhat unconvincingly but nonetheless helpfully, that it will pass. And so far it has. **E**

**BODY
2019**

SCOUT BASSETT

SPRINTER AND LONG JUMPER
BRONZE MEDAL IN 100M AND
LONG JUMP AT 2017 WORLD PARA
ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIPS,
2016 PARALYMPIAN
AGE 31
4-9, 85 POUNDS

Photographed by
Richard Phibbs on May 3,
El Mirage Dry Lake Bed, Calif.

SET DESIGN BY WARD ROBINSON/
WOODEN LADDER; PRODUCTION BY
SAN DIEGO PRODUCTIONS; MAKEUP
BY ERIN SVALSTAD; HAIR BY SAISHA
BEECHAM/ARTISTS MANAGEMENT





THE LIGHT OF POSSIBILITY

BY TIM KEOWN

SHE STOOD AT the starting line, her tears barely dry, her breath still catching in her throat like a backfiring muffler. It is accurate but not sufficient to say she didn't want to be there. It's a good beginning, probably, but it doesn't come close to touching what she was feeling inside or what those stuttered breaths and drying tears signified. And even if you escalate the stakes and say she would have rather been *anywhere* else? Closer, sure, closer, but still a long way from capturing the mix of emotions—angry, sad, terrified, intimidated, humiliated, self-conscious—swirling tornadically inside her.

She looked right and left at the other runners. To Scout Bassett's 14-year-old eyes looking out from her 4-foot-6-inch body, everyone else in this 60-meter race—a qualifying event for the World Para Athletics Championships—looked at least 10 years older. They were confident and strong and composed and all the other things she was convinced she would never be. *What am I doing here?* She had arrived that morning at this track in Orlando with a new prosthetic running leg that was barely 24 hours old. She had stood there crying an ugly-girl, why-are-you-making-me-do-this cry while the kind man who made the prosthetic stood in line and paid the \$5 fee to get her into the field for the 60-meter dash.

She had never run that far, and she had barely run at all with this leg that had been fitted to her tiny body just a day earlier. It was a blade, unlike anything she had worn before—masculine, ugly, obvious. It was not skin-colored like her previous legs, or padded to simulate flesh and bone. This thing—*Oh god, how embarrassing*—hanging down her right side, connecting her thigh to the ground, was utterly devoid of pretense. This leg didn't lie or even try to. This leg told the world the truth: She

wasn't like everybody else.

She had pleaded with the man and her mother through tears in words that were intelligible only to her. *I don't wanna do this! Why are you making me do this?*

There were stomped feet and balled fists and, ultimately, a surrender—*fine!*—when it became evident that no amount of resistance, no matter how loud or public or frenzied, was going to change anybody's mind.

So she lined up all her inadequacies next to those confident/strong/composed women—a lineup of unicorns, really—and looked up at a finish line that appeared eternal. She waited for the starter's gun to go off—*just get this over with*—and when it did, that little 14-year-old with the new leg and the hitched breaths and the puffy eyes did what she felt was required of her:

She ran.

In truth, she didn't so much run as *break free*. She was slow—god, was she slow, the absolute slowest—but with every uncertain stride she left something behind. Everything that held her down for 14 years dropped away: the fears, the sadness, the displacement, the helplessness, the very *otherness* that had defined her life. The confident/composed/strong were all out there ahead of her, their blades flashing in the sunlight, their bodies churning unapologetically toward a certain future, and for the first time, this little girl was able to see herself in terms of possibility instead of limitation.

She crossed the finish line behind them all and knew, somehow, that she was going to be OK. She would go back to her tiny northern Michigan town and stop trying to convince everyone she was just like everyone else. There would be no more hiding, no more flesh-toned legs that really weren't fooling anybody anyway. This finish line suddenly looked like a starting point. The confident/composed/strong bent down and congratulated her and told her they were proud of her, and she looked up at them in awe and right then and there she made a vow:

I'm never again going to be ashamed of my story, or where I came from.



“I want to show that you can have scars and still be beautiful and powerful and strong. They don’t have to be the marker of an awful badge in your life.”

SCOUT BASSETT

SIX YEARS EARLIER, one month before her 8th birthday, a 22-pound girl was taken from an orphanage in Nanjing, China, by her new parents. She had no idea how big the world was or that one even existed beyond the walls of the orphanage. She had never heard of America, or seen a white person, or known any caregivers other than the state employees who fed and clothed her. She had not been outside in close to six years. She could see a playground outside the windows, its bars and swings used only to hang laundry.

Records from the orphanage say she arrived as an 18-month-old with a “severely mangled right leg” resulting from a chemical fire. Her right leg exists nowhere in her memory, so she knows the injury and amputation happened early in her life and it happened in China, and there is no practical reason to ponder the specifics. She knows someone left her, the leg either mangled or missing, the burns on her tiny body either wounds or scars, on a street in Nanjing, where she was found and taken to a police station before being sent to the orphanage.

And even before she found out how big the world could be, the little girl knew her life was not sustainable. Somewhere inside her, despite being cut off from the world, despite being not quite 8 years old, she knew she was weak and failing. The small bowls of porridge she ate every day left her the size of a small toddler. She had fallen many times in the trough-style bathrooms that were cruelly difficult to navigate while balancing on one leg. The amputation was poorly done, and in time a bone—probably a growth plate that was left behind—extruded from the back of her thigh. The bone made a prosthesis anatomically impractical, and the best they could do in a state-run orphanage full of unwanted children in a country with a one-child policy was a homemade leg connected to her body with four leather straps. The pain was unbearable.

She left the orphanage with the skin at the bottom of her right thigh discolored and tender, still carrying the look of a fresh burn six years later. As she jetted off to a

shiny and promising life in the small northern Michigan town of Harbor Springs, she was unaware of air travel. She had no memory of ever riding in a car. She had known nothing, in fact, but deprivation and oppression, but as the plane ascended and China receded, she felt heartsick and homesick.

Terrified, confused and unmoored, she boarded an airplane as Zhu Fuzhi. She got off in the United States as Scout Bassett.

BASSETT, NOW 31, STANDS 4-foot-9 and weighs 85 pounds, and she is the fastest American of her classification ever to run the 100 meters. It’s astonishing to see how fast she can power her body around the track as she trains at an Orlando high school. Her prosthetic running blade—at \$30,000-\$40,000 per leg a very distant relative of the one she christened at 14—does not include a knee joint, which reduces weight and increases speed but gives her gait a slight side-to-side motion. The 100 meters is an event so illogical for a person of her stature that it’s hard to come up with an apt comparison. It’s like a 150-pound man playing offensive tackle in the NFL. When she lined up for the 100 final at the Paralympic Games in Rio in 2016, she was two lanes over from a 6-3 German bilateral amputee whose blades nearly reached Bassett’s hips. Her shoe size is 11C; the C stands for “children’s,” but she prefers to say “Eleven Cute,” with a smile bright enough to wither pessimism.

Her life after being thrust into this massive American experiment has been a search for belonging and identity. Harbor Springs is white and conservative, and the Christian school her parents favored for their three adopted Chinese children was often less than welcoming. “They were so unaccepting of me,” she says. “The girls were so noninclusive and mean, and being the only Asian in an all-white school was not fun.” Scout buried herself in books, plowing through as many political biographies as her brain could digest, and sports, which felt like the easiest and most direct route to assimilation.

She was 12 when her mother took her to

Orlando for the first time to have a custom prosthetic built by Stan Patterson, who was internationally known as a genius in the field. She walked into his business reading a 600-page biography of Barbara Bush.

Patterson leaned over and asked, “Now, Scout, what are your goals?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” she said. “I just want to have a leg that doesn’t fart when I stand up.”

Patterson, stunned but trying not to laugh, recovered well enough to tease the little girl.

“Are you *sure* it’s the leg?”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “It’s the leg.”

Patterson laughs when he tells the story, even though he admits he has lost track of the number of times he’s told it. He tells it because he always tells it. “Scout hates when I tell it,” he says, “which means I *have* to tell it.”

Says Bassett, “That was it, though. That was all I wanted at that point in my life. It was so embarrassing at school. Every time I got out of my chair, it would make this farting noise.”

During that first meeting, Patterson assured Bassett that her goal would be met. “We can definitely do that, Scout,” he said. “But I really think you can aim higher than that.”

A couple of years later, Patterson encouraged her to try on the running prosthetic. “You’re going to be an athlete,” he told her. Bassett had been riding the bench on volleyball and basketball teams for years. “What do you mean?” she asked him. “I’ve struggled my whole life. They’ve never let me play. Why do you think at this point I’m going to be an athlete?” The next day, Patterson took her to that first meet.

“From that point on, I always wanted to run,” she says. “I had found something that really made me feel whole.”

RUNNING WAS FREEDOM, hope, purpose. Running provided the belonging she sought. Running was identity. She started out with distance running (she has run two marathons) and competitive triathlons through the Challenged Athletes Foundation.



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After Bassett's freshman year at UCLA, which she attended on a full ride, she was approached by the Olympics' director of Paralympic track and field.

"I hear you're a runner," Cathy Sellers said. "Have you thought of the Paralympics?"

Bassett, reliving that magical moment nearly 12 years later, says, "As a girl who always wanted to be an elite-level athlete but was never seen that way? *Oh yeah*—I'll do Paralympics. Sign me up."

Running saved her. She had been ready to leave UCLA after her freshman year because she once again felt her *otherness*. The day she moved into her dorm room, her Chinese American roommate unpacked an electric pot of some sort.

"What is that?" Bassett asked.

Her roommate looked at her, thinking she was joking, and when it was clear she wasn't, she said, "It's a rice cooker. What Chinese person doesn't have a rice cooker?"

"She looked at me and sees that I'm Chinese," Bassett says, "but she's confused as to why I'm not more Chinese."

So she ran, away from one thing and toward another. "I've spent lots of time with the question of identity," Bassett says. "I struggle with it because I feel like I have so many different identities. Growing up in a white family and being raised in a white town but being ethnically Chinese, sure, but I'm also an adoptee and I'm a minority and I have a disability. It's like so many different things to struggle with."

Scout grew up with a brother and a sister, both adopted from China, her brother Carter from the same orphanage. Says her sister, Palmer Bassett-Rodriguez, "A lot of people assume that adopted children—especially those with Scout's background—should be so grateful all the time. We are very lucky to have parents who gave us as much as they could, but we didn't choose this life, so it's different from our side. And being 7 and adopted like Scout—there's a lot of stuff you're dealing with for a long time. And no one is going to understand. She felt very alone a lot of the time. But she's healing. Little by little she's healing."

Bassett graduated from UCLA and

went to work for a prosthetics company in Orange County. She disliked the job and the time constraints it put on training for the Paralympics, so in 2015 she quit to train full time. She budgeted \$25 per week for food, mostly Top Ramen. She slept in her 1992 Toyota Corolla and occasionally on a friend's couch in San Diego, near the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista. She deflected pointed questions from friends and family who didn't understand how a graduate of one of the country's best universities would choose this lifestyle. Her father was blunt: He thought it was crazy. But after five months of full-time training, she was offered sponsorships from major companies and was able to afford a place of her own.

"It's that Type A drive," Bassett-Rodriguez says.

The sleeping bag and the pillow she used when she slept in the '92 Corolla were transferred from car to car, finally landing in the back seat of the midsize SUV she's driving now. She wanted them around as a reminder that she no longer needs them.

She was walking to her car after a practice in late July when her coach, former U.S. Olympic hurdler Tonie Campbell, saw the sleeping bag and pillow in the back seat. He stopped and gave her an exasperated look. She followed his eyes and laughed, knowing what was coming.

"Scout," he said. "It's time."

"I know, but ..."

"Scout," he repeated, firmer. "It's time."

She sighed and gave a half-hearted nod. She drove home, parked her car, gathered the sleeping bag and the pillow and carried them inside.

BASSETT HAS THIS disarming habit of interrupting her own conversations and saying, "That's a point I want to come back to later," like a congressman making sure a statement enters into the official record. She is sitting in a room in Patterson's sprawling complex on a Sunday evening after being casted for a new prosthetic that will be fabricated the next morning. The place is remarkably busy. There's a teenage bilateral amputee from a rural town in Uganda who

will be fitted for his first professional prostheses. There's a recent amputee learning to walk all over again and an employee who clearly has a massive crush on Scout—he keeps showing up everywhere she is, always under the guise of "looking for something." She doesn't seem to notice.

But none of the background matters, because Scout has just remembered a point she needs to get back to: the disparity between men and women within Paralympic competition. For the 2020 Paralympics, for instance, Bassett predicts that an 80-member American track and field team would include only 30 women.

"Girls come up to me and say, 'Oh, I don't know if I want to do running because the blades are kind of ugly,'" she says. "I get devastated when I hear that. I tell them, 'But it's how it makes you *feel*.' That's a problem, and it's a huge part of why I did the Body Issue. We celebrate men who are amputees; a veteran is celebrated as a hero when he goes to war, loses his leg and comes home and puts one of these on. But you see a woman and it's weakness, a bodily imperfection. It's viewed as a deficiency. I want girls to see this and say, 'This is something that is powerful and beautiful and stunning.' I want them to see the places you can go and the things you can overcome through sport."

There are five blades on the counter next to her, each one a different width and stiffness. She picks up the middle one and rotates it as she holds it up to the fluorescent light, admiring its beauty and utility. "This is as big a part of me as anything else," she says. Her smile is enough to turn possibility into reality. She runs her hand across the blade's cross-hatched carbon fiber and slaps it against her palm like a trucker with a tire iron.

"Yes, it looks very masculine," she says. "But I want a girl in my position to look at something like this and say, 'This is *badass*, and I want one.'"

THREE YEARS AGO, Bassett sat in the parking lot of the orphanage in Nanjing and steeled herself. It was a place that had dulled her spirit and dwindled her body, yet

Find more photos,
behind-the-scenes
moments and
interviews at
ESPN.com/bodyissue.



**“Running helped me
become a confident,
strong, powerful
woman who would not
take no for an answer.”**

SCOUT BASSETT

it provided—strangely—the sense of belonging she has sought ever since. She left as a confused child a month away from her 8th birthday and returned as an accomplished, outwardly assured 28-year-old who had just competed in the 2016 Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro. She finished a disappointing fifth in the 100 and 10th in the long jump, and she carried that disappointment with her to that parking lot. Before she opened the car door, she closed her eyes and said something like a prayer.

I’m going to show these kids there is hope, there is love, there is light, there is possibility.

She was permitted to reenter the orphanage but was not allowed access to any of the living areas or the bathrooms. Still, the past arrived mostly by smell; “Ohhh, the bathroom,” she says. “Every once in a while I’ll get a whiff of that same smell when I’m in China and it takes me right back to the orphanage.”

Improvements have been incremental. There is still no formal schooling, but she met a new “entertainment” teacher who does crafts with the children. Bassett saw children in an empty lot where the playground used to be.

“I was able to face the place that had broken me as a very young girl,” she says. “I realized I had carried that brokenness and pain up until then.”

She didn’t cry once as she walked through the orphanage, and she didn’t cry when she played with the children, and she didn’t cry when she got back into the car after the visit ended.

She cried for weeks after she got home.

“Seeing those kids gave me a different perspective,” Bassett says. “I can only imagine the guilt and shame my parents have lived with, knowing they had to abandon me because they couldn’t take care of me.”

She walked into the orphanage with no desire to seek out and meet her biological parents. She didn’t think she needed the answers to the questions she might ask, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to know them even if she could. “Besides,” she says, “the chances of me finding my parents in a country of more than a billion people? Really?”

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She walked out of the orphanage after feeding babies and passing out sports equipment, and her thoughts had changed. She looked at the faces in front of her, those helpless infants and toddlers who had been abandoned the same way she had. *The natural instinct of a mother is not to abandon her child. Can you imagine the burden*

she and my father have been carrying? She realized she would like to find them not for her but for them, to tell them she's fine, that she made it. She wants to let them see her, to present herself for what she is, a confident, strong, composed young woman whose success spans continents. She wants to stand before them and let them know

that it was hard—and that it sometimes still is—but that she is alive and healthy and successful. And maybe, come to think of it, she does have something she wants to say to them.

Just three words, perhaps the three most beautiful words in the language:

I forgive you. ■



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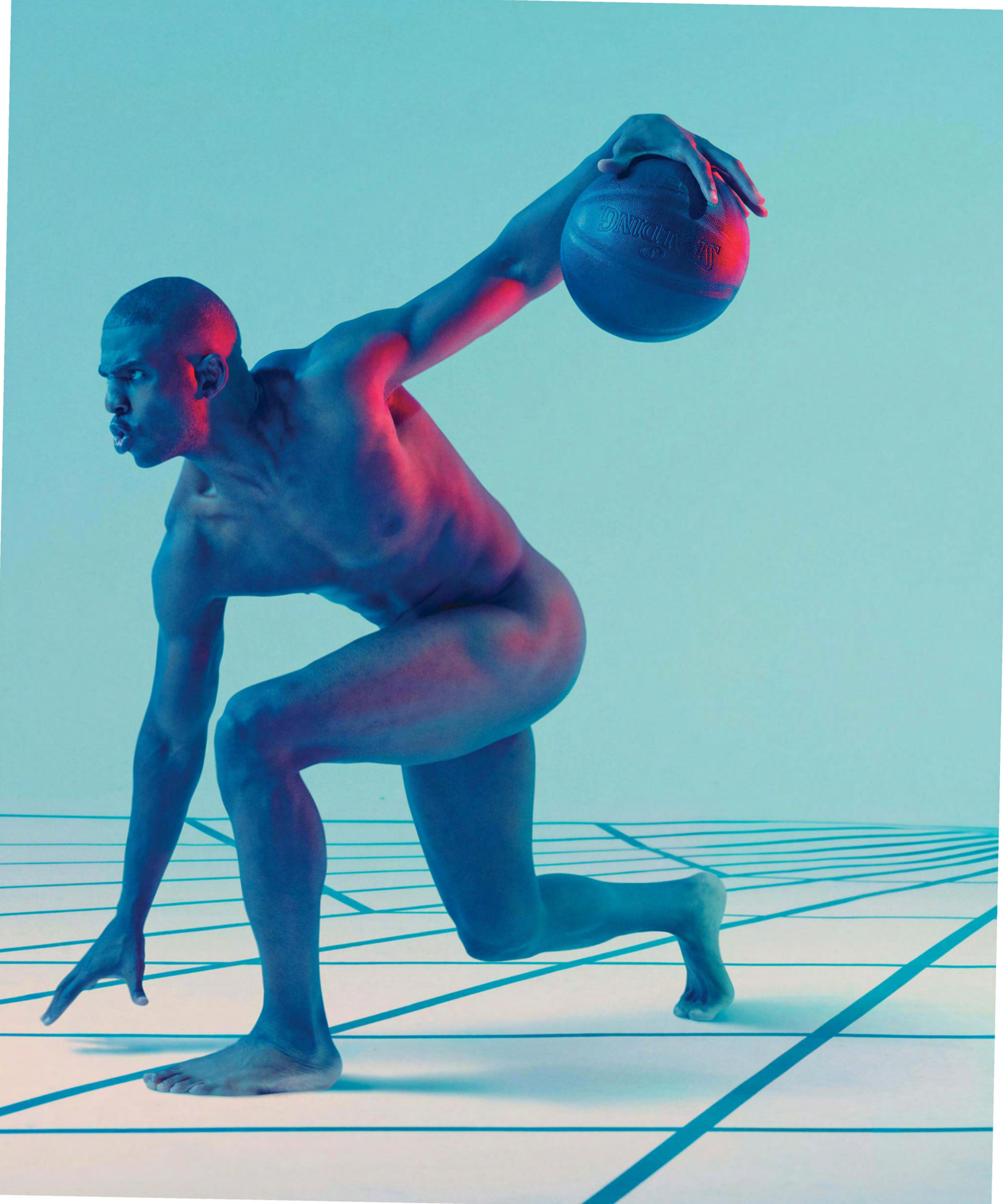
CHRIS PAUL

POINT GUARD, OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER
NINE-TIME ALL-STAR, 2005-06
NBA ROOKIE OF THE YEAR, TWO-TIME
OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST
AGE 34
6-0, 190 POUNDS

At 34, I feel a lot better than I did a few years ago. That’s just from experience, learning and never being satisfied. A lot of people get in this league and they get complacent. They’re like, “Oh, I’m here. I’ll just be here.” No. There’s somebody coming to try to take your job. And for me, that’s not an option. You’re not taking my job. **As a point guard, I have to see everything going on on the court.** And after playing for so long, it’s easier knowing where people are going to be. **I’ll be in a game and I’ll make a pass or something, and people are like, “Ooh, how’d you see that?”** You can survey the court real quick and, well, there ain’t but so many different places you can go on a court. **Steve Nash took really good care of his body.** Bron takes really good care of his body. The biggest thing those guys have in common is discipline. **My diet has changed dramatically since I started.** My rookie year there was a McDonald’s right by where we practiced, and I’d stop and get a McGriddle combo every day. I would get home, and my brother and I would get Chick-fil-A. Then we would usually order pizza at night. We didn’t know any different. **But everything’s a lot different now.** Some of the biggest choices I make daily are what I put into my body. I’m 34. I’m going to be chasing around a bunch of 19- and 20-year-olds. There’s no excuse. If you get a routine and you stick to it, the sky’s the limit. —AS TOLD TO STACEY PRESSMAN

Photographed by Gary Land on July 11, Los Angeles

SET AND PROP STYLING BY ALEX COLE; HAIR BY WILL BROOKS;
GROOMING BY SHAWN JANIFER/CLOUTIER REMIX; PRODUCTION BY GREG SMITH



A full-page photograph of Chris Paul's back and right arm, illuminated with a blue light. In the background, a glowing yellow basketball hoop is visible against a dark setting with red and orange light streaks.

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2019

“I don’t want to steal an NBA body for the day—I just want the height. Give me that Boban [Marjanovic] height—it’s over for everybody. We ain’t even going to play the games.”

CHRIS PAUL



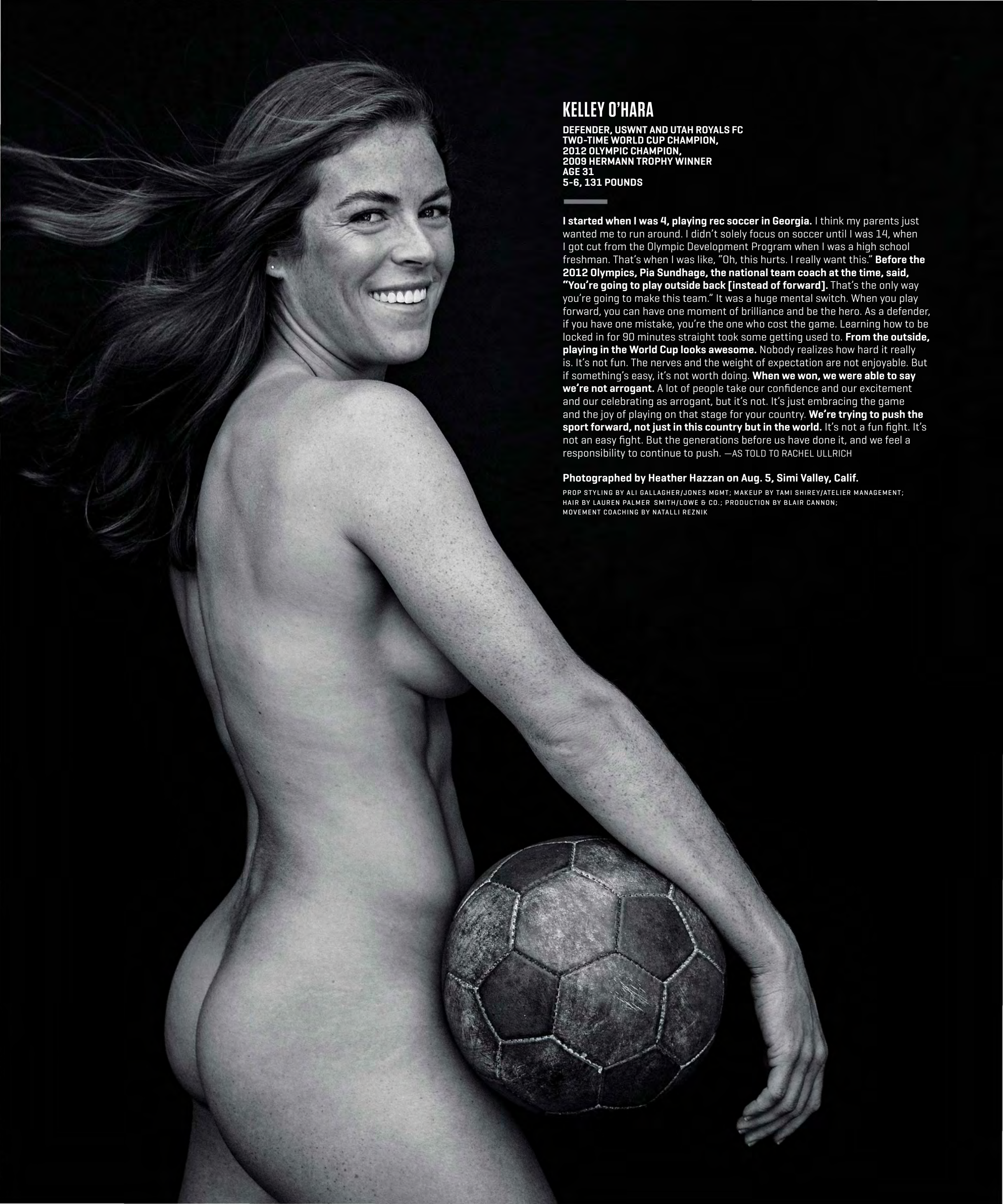


“I’m proud of my core—my abs. When I eat, this is where my weight comes immediately. If I eat some french fries, they go right there.”

CHRIS PAUL

BODY 2019





KELLEY O'HARA

DEFENDER, USWNT AND UTAH ROYALS FC
TWO-TIME WORLD CUP CHAMPION,
2012 OLYMPIC CHAMPION,
2009 HERMANN TROPHY WINNER
AGE 31
5-6, 131 POUNDS

I started when I was 4, playing rec soccer in Georgia. I think my parents just wanted me to run around. I didn't solely focus on soccer until I was 14, when I got cut from the Olympic Development Program when I was a high school freshman. That's when I was like, "Oh, this hurts. I really want this." **Before the 2012 Olympics, Pia Sundhage, the national team coach at the time, said, "You're going to play outside back [instead of forward].** That's the only way you're going to make this team." It was a huge mental switch. When you play forward, you can have one moment of brilliance and be the hero. As a defender, if you have one mistake, you're the one who cost the game. Learning how to be locked in for 90 minutes straight took some getting used to. **From the outside, playing in the World Cup looks awesome.** Nobody realizes how hard it really is. It's not fun. The nerves and the weight of expectation are not enjoyable. But if something's easy, it's not worth doing. **When we won, we were able to say we're not arrogant.** A lot of people take our confidence and our excitement and our celebrating as arrogant, but it's not. It's just embracing the game and the joy of playing on that stage for your country. **We're trying to push the sport forward, not just in this country but in the world.** It's not a fun fight. It's not an easy fight. But the generations before us have done it, and we feel a responsibility to continue to push. —AS TOLD TO RACHEL ULLRICH

Photographed by Heather Hazzan on Aug. 5, Simi Valley, Calif.

PROP STYLING BY ALI GALLAGHER/JONES MGMT; MAKEUP BY TAMI SHIREY/ATELIER MANAGEMENT;
HAIR BY LAUREN PALMER SMITH/LOWE & CO.; PRODUCTION BY BLAIR CANNON;
MOVEMENT COACHING BY NATALLI REZNIK

A full-page photograph of actress Kelley O'Hara. She is sitting on a wooden bench outdoors, leaning back on her right arm and smiling at the camera. She is wearing no clothing. The background consists of dry, brushy hills under a clear sky. A quote is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**“I eat a ton of carbs
because I burn
through it all. Good
carbs—I’m not
shoving a doughnut
in my face before
a game. Although
I have once or twice.”**

KELLEY O’HARA

BODY 2019

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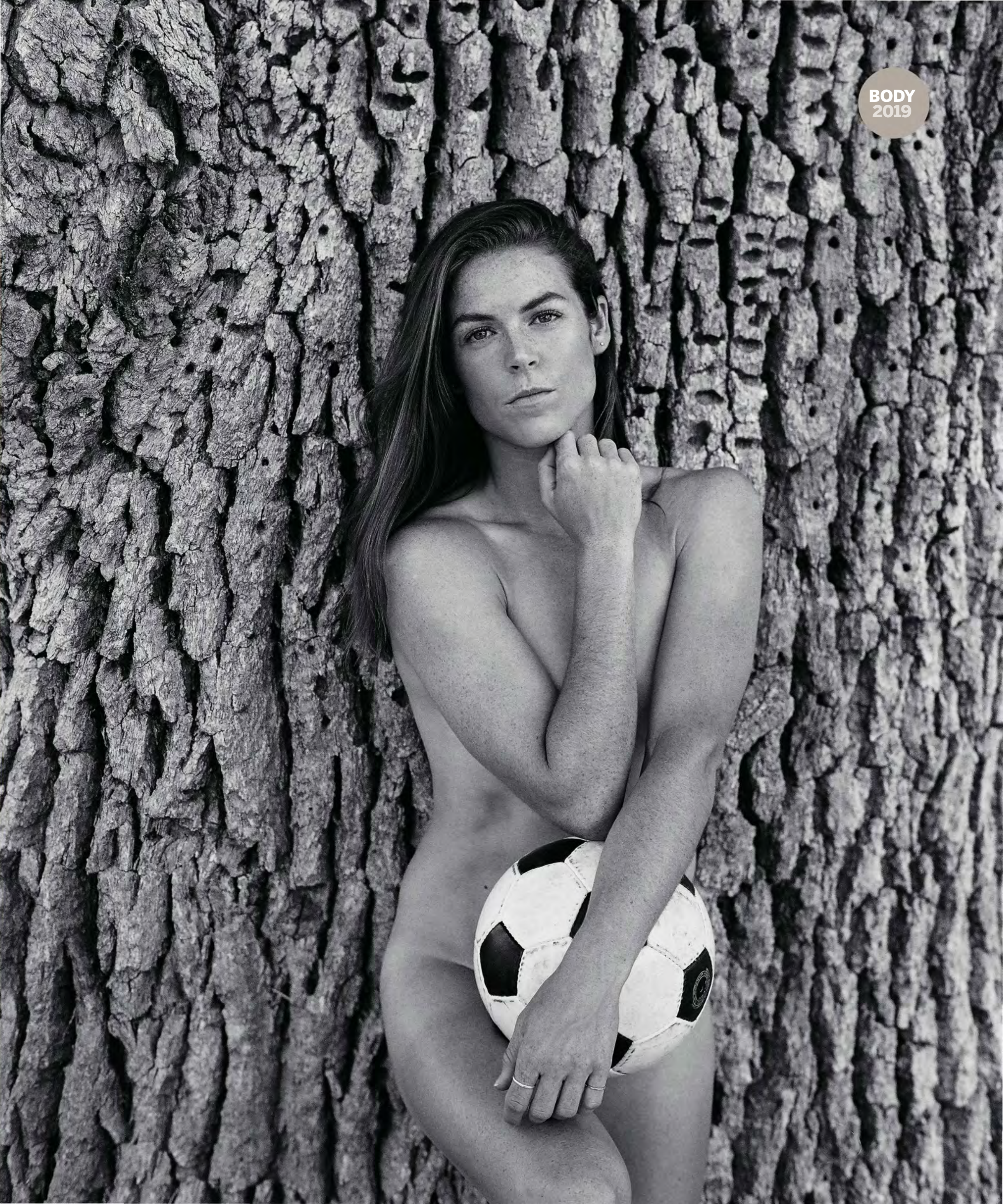


A full-page photograph of Kelley O'Hara, a professional soccer player, standing in a dry, grassy field with hills in the background. She is smiling and looking down at a worn soccer ball she is holding with her right hand. Her left hand is resting on her right arm. She is unclothed.

**“People always ask,
‘What’s your favorite win?’
It’s like asking
somebody to name
their favorite child.”**

KELLEY O’HARA

BODY
2019



ASPHALT IN THE WOUNDS

BY RYAN MCGEE

“MY FRIEND, I have seen so many crazy scars on so many race car drivers, but when people see this ...”

James Hinchcliffe is beaming. That’s not uncommon. The 32-year-old IndyCar racer smiles pretty much all the time, even now, disrobing for cameras to pose atop the world’s most famous racetrack. He’s known for it. Not the nudity, the smile. But he is also a racer’s racer, a road course ace, six-time IndyCar race winner, Indianapolis 500 pole sitter, even a *Dancing With the Stars* runner-up. The wheelman they call Hinch is a competitor first and foremost. And, yes, that even applies to scars.

Hinchcliffe never hesitated over his Body Issue invite. He was eager to add his name to the racers already seen on these pages—from his friend, rival and fellow *DWTS* alum Helio Castroneves to drag racer Courtney Force, wife of another IndyCar pal, Graham Rahal. But Hinchcliffe also wanted to make sure when stripping bare on the high holy ground of Indianapolis Motor Speedway that his scars were visible.

“Honestly, when you see them, they don’t make a lot of sense until you know how I got them,” he says of his unusual markings. Most are located in, ahem, tricky areas. But the most prominent is to the right of his belly button. “But as far as ‘How’d you get that scar?’ goes, I like my chances of winning that race. At the very least I’m certainly in the running.”

For us mere mortals, scars are stories. That extra white line on your shin from the time you fell off your bike. That raised bump on the back of your hand where an art class miscalculation stuck an X-Acto blade into your skin instead of the construction paper.

But for racers, scars aren’t stories. They are Dostoyevsky novels. John Force wriggling his half-missing right knee, blown apart by an exploding Funny Car tire at the





JAMES HINCHCLIFFE

INDYCAR DRIVER
FOUR TOP-10 FINISHES IN
INDYCAR SERIES, 2011 INDYCAR
ROOKIE OF THE YEAR
AGE 32
5-9, 160 POUNDS

Photographed by Mark
Williams & Sara Hirakawa
on July 23, Indianapolis

PRODUCTION BY SHEL BURKS/THE WALL
PRODUCTIONS; GROOMING BY ERIN
SVALSTAD



“The accident changed me in a huge way for the better. But professionally I’m willing to take the same risks, because I love it.”

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE



Dallas Motorplex in 2007. F1 legend Niki Lauda tipping his ballcap to reveal his burned-up scalp, a lifelong reminder of the 1976 German Grand Prix. A.J. Foyt walking bowlegged on permanently bent knees and left-heel-turned-bag-of-bone-fragments since Road America in 1990.

Racers' bodies make football players' bodies look like porcelain. But those slashes and dashes and surgical dots serve only as punctuation marks to a racing career—everything but a period. None of the drivers listed above let those crashes—or the scars they caused—keep them from the racetrack.

“We are simply wired differently than anyone else. Forget other athletes. I mean all other human beings,” Hinchcliffe explains, pointing to the 1999 death of his hero, Canadian Greg Moore, as more inspiring than frightening. “When we are injured, no matter how bad, our first question is what I asked when I woke up in the ICU in 2015. We don’t ask, ‘Am I going to live?’ We ask, ‘When can I get back into the race car that just tried to kill me?’ They’re like, ‘We just spent the last six hours trying to save you from the car and now ... you’re just throwing our work out the window?’ It’s just how we’re wired.”

Hinchcliffe, at 5-foot-9, 160 pounds, is in incredible physical shape. Most IndyCar drivers are, so as to best outmuscle a 1,600-pound, 700-horsepower machine that never wants to do exactly what you need it to, for hours at a time. That’s built via even more hours on bikes, cardio machines, weight benches and mechanical racing simulators so tricked-out they would make Poe Dameron queasy.

That toughness might have kept Hinchcliffe’s heart beating and brain firing on May 18, 2015, just long enough for safety crews to retrieve him within seconds of sure death. During a routine pre-Indy 500 practice, a suspension part that never fails did, instantly rendering useless the crucial right front tire and pile-driving his Dallara DW12 into the Turn 3 wall at more than 220 mph.

Another suspension part, a rod meant to collapse in violent crashes, did not. The force of the blow against the retaining wall—126 g’s, the most recorded in IndyCar history—hammered the carbon fiber nail

through the protective tub Hinchcliffe was in, through his right leg, clipping his tailbone and then through his upper left thigh.

"I'm not trying to brag here, but I kind of am," he says. "The only way you get these scars that I have is to get shish-kebabbed. And that's what I was: shish-kebabbed."

Safety crews were puzzled as to why they couldn't lift him out of the cockpit. The rod that was in him was also stuck into the side of the tub and was holding him down. It had pierced his left femoral artery, the primary blood supplier to the leg. James Hinchcliffe was bleeding out. The safety workers figured he had about 120 seconds, so they pulled the car apart to extract him. When they did, the rod yanked from his body and jerked back into his seat with a thunk.

Had Hinchcliffe been at any other track, his story likely would have ended here. But Indianapolis Motor Speedway shares 16th Street with Indiana University Health Methodist, motorsports' best-known hospital, both the saving grace and final resting place for an untold roster of Indy 500 racers. It was there that doctors discovered Hinchcliffe's sliced artery, only after he had bled through the gurney into another pool of red on the ER floor. And it was there that he asked the "When can I race again?" question—perhaps the one facility on earth where it wouldn't be met with eye-rolling.

He was told it would be about two weeks before he could walk again. He was walking in four days. He was told he'd be in the hospital for at least a month. He was out in 10 days. Finally, he was told he wouldn't be back in a race car for at least half a year. It took him only four months. "It still wasn't fast enough for me," he says, laughing. "As an athlete, you turn every tiny exercise, every day, every week into a competition, into a game. 'If I win the next hour, or even the next few minutes, I'll get to the long-range goal faster.' Everything is a 500-mile race."

But between the games and the work, Hinchcliffe found himself in an unfamiliar place. A dark place. The happiest dude in the room suddenly wasn't. He grew an unkempt beard and toned down his usually prolific social media habits to keep his rehab efforts private. Support poured in from fans



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and most of the IndyCar paddock, but he also learned what all racers do when laid up: that most fellow drivers would rather visit a torture chamber than the halls of a hospital.

As Robert Duvall's Harry Hogge explained in *Days of Thunder*: "Drivers can't stand to be reminded of what can happen to them in a race car. They don't go to hospitals. They don't go to funerals. You get a driver to a funeral before he's actually dead, you've made history."

Hinchcliffe doesn't deny that: "We lack that self-preservation gene that most people have, and we all understand that there's an inherent risk in what we do, and we accept that risk. But as long as you're in the car, you can't ever think about it."

The racer's golden rule states that as soon as they do think about it while in the cockpit, it is time to exit that cockpit for good. Any nanosecond focused on anything other than the car in one's hands and the track ahead is time wasted—death courted.

Rick Mears, the four-time Indianapolis 500 champion, was famously fearless. He raced trucks in the desert with broken bones, and at the height of his IndyCar powers in the early 1980s, he won races despite facial burns suffered at Indy and crushed feet earned at a triangular racetrack in Quebec. But late in 1992, with chances left for an unprecedented fifth Indy 500 title, Rock-et Rick shockingly hung up his helmet.

"I broke my foot and sprained my wrist badly at Indy in May," Mears recalls. "For the first time in my life, I woke up in the morning and the first thing I thought of wasn't how to make my race car faster. It was pain and self-preservation and other stuff. It was like a switch flipped. Once that switch flips, you aren't the same again. So it's time to go."

In summer 2015, Hinchcliffe worked hard to evade that switch. His greatest allies were those racing friends who sucked it up and parked their born-in aversions to visit. He leaned on his boss, owner Sam Schmidt, a quadriplegic since a 2000 race car crash.

"There are things you will never know about yourself, from your body to your mind, until you are there in that bed or in that rehab facility, on your own with what seems like an impossible mountain to

climb," Schmidt says. "You learn to take the little victories each day. Some days don't have a victory, so you focus on the next one. James needed to know that. I told him that. I hope it helped him like it did when people said those things to me."

It did. Those words and a new perspective have ridden with Hinchcliffe every day since, through his Indy 500 pole position tearfully earned one year after the crash, his victories in the Long Beach Grand Prix and at Iowa Speedway, his marriage to longtime girlfriend Becky Dalton and, yes, his 2016 near-title run on *Dancing With the Stars*.

Perhaps the greatest gift from that day wasn't realized until Aug. 19, 2018, when Hinchcliffe was caught up in a multicar crash during the opening laps at Pocono Raceway. He was OK, but teammate and fellow Canadian Robert Wickens suffered multiple fractures, the most serious to his spine. The 30-year-old was paralyzed from the chest down, but unlike Hinchcliffe, he chose to broadcast his rehabilitation over social media, from his first foot movements three months after the accident to driving a hand-controlled pace car through the streets of Toronto in July. Frequently seen by his side? James Hinchcliffe.

"My injuries weren't as bad as Robbie's. Still, I've been there," Hinchcliffe says. "I know what the hospital and the rehab room smell like and feel like. I know what it's like to be on that operating table and think, 'Again, really?' So what I told Robbie was what I learned. Any time you are having a bad day, you know what? It's just a phase. I don't know if that phase is going to last a day or a week or a month, but one day you will be able to look back ... and acknowledge how far you've come since that time."

When James Hinchcliffe looks at his scars, that's what he sees. Not the rod that skewered his body. Not the pond of blood. Not the ticking clock. Certainly not the fear. He sees marks earned and lessons learned.

"Having a couple of scars, like, whatever, no big deal. If it helps tell the story and ... I can help somebody understand that without having to go through something like that, man, job done. It's all worth it if just one person sees it that way." ■





IMPERFECT BALANCE

BY RAMONA SHELBURNE

THE IDEA WAS a good one. Spend WNBA All-Star weekend in Las Vegas with one of the biggest personalities in town, Aces center Liz Cambage. Write an access piece to accompany the fierce photos that the 6-foot-8 Australian star had shot for the Body Issue back in April.

As we walked through the Park MGM casino in late July, Cambage laughing and shouting all the way, onlookers gawked to see what the ruckus was about. Most smiled. A few pointed. One man even asked, “Are you Griner?” (Fortunately for him, Cambage was on the phone and didn’t notice. “My mom used to call me Bliv,” she said with a shrug. “As in oblivious.”)

It was all great scene. Exactly what you look for when you’re trying to tell a story about a woman whose physical presence can be both her greatest gift and her greatest challenge.

Cambage had been living and playing in Las Vegas for about two and a half months, and she was basically a local at this point—one of the city’s artists-in-residence, the basketball version of Celine Dion. At All-Star weekend, she was an unofficial host, her name displayed alongside Snoop Dogg and Iggy Azalea as the DJ at the WNBA’s party at Mandalay Bay.

When Cambage was traded to the Aces back in May, she hadn’t been sure about playing in Vegas. She has been open about her history with anxiety and substance abuse, and the idea of facing those demons while living in Sin City terrified her. “Twenty-two-year-old me, you would have never seen me again,” she told me that weekend.

But she is 28 now, and after a few weeks in town, she came to feel the opposite was true: that the very act of conquering the demons while starring for the Aces had given her more strength, had better grounded her.

Even before the trade, she’d grown religious about maintaining her lifestyle and





LIZ CAMBAGE

CENTER, LAS VEGAS ACES
2018 WNBA SCORING
LEADER, TWO-TIME OLYMPIAN
FOR AUSTRALIA
AGE 28
6-8, 218 POUNDS

Photographed by
Sophy Holland on
April 11, Los Angeles

MAKEUP BY ERIN SVALSTAD; HAIR
BY SHERIDAN WARD; SET DESIGN BY
WARD ROBINSON/WOODEN LADDER;
BASKETBALL AND SUNGLASSES
BY A-MORIR STUDIOS



**“Normal is boring, and it’s about
time we start doing things
differently for the outliers.”**

LIZ CAMBAGE



routine. Plant-based food. A normal sleep schedule. Regular workouts in the morning. Limited alcohol and partying. Just basketball, deejaying and whatever social life she could fit in around those boundaries.

It seemed to be working. When we shot her for the Body Issue, Cambage said she was in “such a good place at the moment. ... I’m the happiest I’ve ever been, that I can ever remember.”

She even mentioned that she’d stopped taking the medication she used to take for her anxiety and depression. “I’ve just got into a place where I don’t want any pharmaceuticals in my life anymore,” she said.

At the time, it was an honest, proud statement. Cambage was certain that she’d gotten her issues under control with the healthy lifestyle she’d been committed to.

But a breakdown doesn’t happen all at once. It’s like a ball of yarn unspooling. And during All-Star weekend, that’s what happened. Cambage was booked solid with interviews, photo shoots and sponsor commitments, which left little time for rest and hanging out with her friends from Australia who’d flown into town. They didn’t have the right equipment for her at the party she was supposed to DJ, a party for which she’d been preparing for weeks, so she couldn’t perform—which she found out while on-stage. She didn’t get enough sleep. She drank, trying to keep up with her friends who wanted to enjoy their vacation. She felt bad about falling back into those unhealthy patterns, but—on six hours of sleep the entire weekend—didn’t have the emotional bandwidth to deal with it.

Cambage told ESPN’s Holly Rowe during her halftime interview that that’s literally how little she slept during All-Star weekend. She mentioned it to me too, the day before—then added: “I probably shouldn’t have told you that.”

But she did tell me that. I think she knew she was close to the edge. She was watching the ball of yarn unspooling in front of her eyes.

LESS THAN TWO weeks after my trip to Vegas, Cambage published a first-person account in The Players’ Tribune detailing recent struggles with her mental health,

including an anxiety attack in the days after All-Star weekend, one that led her to sit out two games.

“I wanted to let everyone know that my mental health ... it got caught up in the rip last week,” she wrote. “And it wasn’t pretty. It was actually pretty ugly. But I also wanted to let everyone know that I didn’t drown. I’m still here, and still fighting this battle on a daily basis.”

When I read the piece, I thought back to our second meeting, in Los Angeles a week before, when Cambage suggested catching up while she worked with her osteopath, Fabrice Gautier, at his studio in Beverly Hills.

“It might seem like I’m up here,” Cambage said, describing how high her mood had been in recent weeks, freed from the “numbing” effect she hated from her medication. “But I’m still going through it. It’s been since February that I’ve been off all my medication, and it’s hard feeling emotions again.

“I feel everything.”

Cambage has made a point of being open about her journey, hoping it will help others. But talking about it also serves to remind herself that self-care is something she must always work at and tend to.

“Whenever you’re dealing with mental health issues, you have to know what your triggers are,” says Cambage’s close friend from Australia, Arrionne Simmons. “And you have to adapt to make sure you are keeping yourself the healthiest that you can be.

“You can’t learn these things unless you go through it. So from the past and everything she has gone through, everything she’s dealt with, she’s now learning, ‘What can I do to better myself when these situations arise again?’”

But the anxiety and depression are always there, lurking. The key is for Cambage to recognize what she’s feeling and how to work through it. “Back in the day, I used to really question, ‘Why me? Why me?’” she told me in L.A. “But now I’m in a place where I really do know that God gives his hardest battles to his strongest warriors. Everything you’re going through is just a test, and it’s going to make you stronger.

“If I didn’t go through all that darkness, I wouldn’t be able to appreciate the light now.”

WHEN WE TALKED in Vegas, Cambage said our conversations about the Body Issue and standards of beauty had gotten her thinking about identity as a mixed-race woman. She went searching for a photo of herself as a teenager, with Simmons, in which they're both wearing colored contact lenses.

"My hair is blond and I've got blue contacts in," Cambage said, shaking her head. "As a teenager I was really self-conscious because I was so much taller than everyone else. And in Australia there weren't many black girls around—there definitely weren't any dark girls on TV—so I didn't really have anyone to look up to."

Simmons and Cambage met as teenagers in Australia. They were essentially each other's only black friend; Simmons and her cousins helped teach Cambage how to style her hair (Cambage's mother is white). "Obviously there was probably a deeper issue going on there," says Simmons, who now lives in Los Angeles, of the photo Cambage dug up. "We thought we looked prettier if we had these colored eyes."

Cambage and Simmons met playing basketball, and that's what brought a 10-year-old Cambage to the sport in the first place. She and her mother had just moved to a new city, where she didn't have many friends, so her mother took her to basketball practice. She fell in love after she scored her first basket (especially since her mom promised her \$10 after the bucket) and was instantly destined for stardom.

"She scored and she stopped in the middle of the court and did a little dance, and there was a woman sitting next to me who said, 'Oh my god, I'm so happy I was here to see that,'" says her mother, Julia Cambage. "I said, 'Why's that?' and she said, 'Because that kid's going to be a star.'"

"I didn't know what she could see in her, but it was quite interesting, I think, for someone to say that the first time she'd ever scored a basket in her life."

At 6 feet by age 14, Cambage dominated almost every opponent with her size and her talents, and her star grew quickly. But so did the expectations put on her. As she made her way through Australia's youth



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basketball system, she quickly found that the sport could have its downside.

"I love the sport, I love everything it's given me," she says now. "It taught me a lot about myself. It showed me a lot about the world. But it's been very love-hate, me and the game."

CAMBAGE WAS NOT yet 16 when she first left home to live and train at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra. "That's probably the worst time to isolate kids," Cambage says. "It was literally like a mini jail that we lived in. Like high security. We weren't allowed to leave our rooms at night. We still snuck out and went out all the time. Just the teenagers and hormones and living with football boys and basketball players. It was just a mess living in that place."

She was desperately lonely and homesick.

"She would ring me and she'd say, 'Mum-my, were you going to come up this weekend?'" Julia says. "Of course, I wouldn't have been, but naturally I did. So I'd say, 'Of course, darling, yes, I'm coming. Yeah, absolutely.'"

"And then I'd be on a plane and off to Canberra. [The airline] Qantas has a status, you know, levels: bronze, gold, platinum. I think I made platinum in one year traveling between Melbourne and Canberra."

Just two years later, an 18-year-old Cambage went pro full time, moving back to Melbourne to play in the Women's Professional Basketball League. In her second season, she was MVP, and she began planning to make the move to the WNBA before her 20th birthday. The only problem: The No. 2 pick in the 2011 WNBA draft belonged to the Tulsa Shock, a team in a city in which she had said openly she did not want to live or play.

The Shock selected her anyway. After years in Australia's cities, she struggled in Tulsa. She felt an immediate pressure to perform for the team, which had gone 6-28 in 2010. Even with Cambage, the Shock lost 25 of their first 26 games in 2011.

"I would cry on the phone with my mom and my agent, begging to come home. Literally every day," she says. "I'm a 19-year-old girl. On a team where I wasn't supported, I wasn't nurtured."

After the 2012 Olympics, Cambage announced that she wouldn't return to Tulsa for the next WNBA season—the day that her flight was meant to take off for Tulsa. To make a living, she turned to the leagues overseas, which proved just as hard.

For the next four seasons, Cambage spent her winters in China. Her salary was exponentially higher, but Cambage found herself isolated culturally and personally, speaking English only with her team's translator.

"I kind of like it now, because I don't understand anyone and I don't have to listen to anything," she says. "When you're going nonstop all year round, it's kind of nice to just be lost in translation. But when I was in my early 20s it was hell."

Her mom came to visit her then too. Just not as often as before.

"It was quite complex," Julia says. "The first time we were in China, we were in the middle of nowhere, and literally nobody spoke English. She navigated it really well over a long period of time, but you're alone in a hotel room, living away from your team, and you're very isolated."

She didn't understand her daughter's foreign life, and she worried about her.

A huge part of Julia wanted to drag her daughter home to Australia.

"But then there's a part of me that goes, 'You're climbing up a hill. You're destined for bigger things,'" her mother says.

"And we've always known that. Since she was a little girl."

THAT BIG STAGE—and those big expectations—have both driven and haunted Cambage throughout her professional career.

The disappointment in herself when she doesn't play well can stoke all sorts of unhealthy thoughts and behaviors. The utter isolation she feels being far from home, many time zones away from family and friends. Her size, which makes her a target for extra-physical play from opponents.

She has tried to cope in different ways: self-medicating with prescription drugs and alcohol at 19, she says; on medications from doctors since 2016. But even on the medication, she "couldn't function."

"It just numbs everything," she told me in







“Being tall is kind of like cheat mode in a video game. But it has its pros and cons—people get away with doing a lot to me to try and stop me.”

LIZ CAMBAGE

Vegas. “You don’t really feel things properly. I didn’t dream. I stopped dreaming for years. Because going to sleep would be like knocking myself out.”

The 2016 Olympics brought on Cambage’s lowest point. After tearing her Achilles in 2014, she missed several of Team Australia’s 2015 qualifiers, and relations with the team and the federation were

strained. It was a “hot mess,” Cambage says. “But for some reason, I just wanted to go to another Olympics, so I just tried to push through.”

Australia, a medal favorite, bombed out in the quarterfinals, losing to Serbia despite 29 points and 11 rebounds from Cambage. “It just tore me apart,” she says. “I had to take time away from the sport just to really

get back to me and find what I want to do and who I want to be.”

She ignored messages from friends, coaches, fans. “I went missing from the basketball world, pretty much,” she says. “I hated basketball, and I didn’t want anything to do with those people at the time. A lot of my life is just—a lot of my life I’ve just felt like a piece of meat. No one actually really

cares, they only care if you're playing."

Later that year, Cambage spiraled. "I just partied myself into the deepest and darkest hole," she says. "I got to a point where I'm like, 'Hmm, I literally have no will to live.'"

One morning, when Julia Cambage was on the way to work, she got a call from Liz. "Hi, Bubba," she said. "How are you? Are you OK?"

"No, I'm not," Julia remembers her saying. "I think I'm going to hurt myself."

Julia told her daughter that she'd be there as soon as she could. When she arrived, she found her in bed.

"She hadn't been to sleep for days. And she said, 'I can't cope. I can't do this anymore. I don't want to be here,'" her mother recalls. "And so I just sat with her for 12 hours and finally took her home. She literally cried for that entire time and then for the next few days as well. She was completely broken."

"That's the hardest thing I've ever done," Liz says, "was call my mum and say, 'I don't want to live anymore.'"

That was the first time Cambage went off her medications—cold turkey, without tapering, she says. But then, as now, she called to ask for help. And eventually, she picked herself up and found her way back.

JULIA CAMBAGE CAME to visit her daughter in Las Vegas earlier this season. The flight from Melbourne was still long, but her daughter was in such a different place—and, more important, seemed supported by her new team.

"You want your children to be happy no matter where they are," Julia says. "And I'd have to say I'm super excited at the moment because of how well they're treating her in Las Vegas. What a great organization it is and just how incredibly supportive they've been."

Despite Cambage's reservations about coming to Vegas, she knew she couldn't return to Dallas, where she'd played the previous season in her first year back in the WNBA. The team had fired coach Fred Williams, the person who'd earned her trust and made her feel comfortable. And she was adamant that she wanted to live on the

West Coast to be closer to her family. After digging herself out of that dark hole in 2016, things like this mattered—she prioritized her self-care and mental health above all else.

In the end, Aces head coach Bill Laimbeer convinced her—in his uniquely Bill Laimbeer way (picture one of the NBA's most notorious Bad Boys trying to recruit)—that he respected her game and thought he could get the best out of her.

"Liz looks at herself as a global person, and there's no other team in this league that could afford her those kinds of opportunities than us," he says, referencing MGM, the team's corporate parent. "You know, we got casinos in Macao and China, we got them in Dubai, we were looking at one in Japan. She wants to be in the entertainment world and we're one of the biggest entertainment companies in the world. So it seemed to be a natural fit if those are her interests."

"But that's only one piece of the puzzle. I told her very clearly that she has a day job. That's our task, that's our mission. We are going to win here in Las Vegas. That's all we were about. This is how we do business. We will respect you at all times."

Eventually, Cambage was excited about the move. And when she arrived, the Aces made a point of supporting her on and off the court. Laimbeer's daughter Keri, the team's head of player-coach communications, has become a close friend.

"I put out fires, I help them with things, I make sure they have what they need and whenever they need it," Keri Laimbeer says.

Keri figured out pretty quickly that all Cambage needed was someone who looked after her and would help her stick to the lifestyle and routines that have grounded her and given her a sense of peace. "She needed to get herself healthy and stay healthy," she says.

CAMBAGE STOPPED DOING that during All-Star weekend. And after going 5-for-21 in the first two games of the second half, she couldn't cope. After her "meltdown," Cambage turned to Keri and to her agent, Allison Galer, to help her mend after everything felt like it was unraveling.

"Allison was pretty firm on me not traveling the next day," she says now. "I really wanted to go to Dallas [for the next game], and Allison was like, 'No, you're not OK. You need to take a couple of days off to get your mind right.'"

"We all came to the decision that I needed to do what's best for me."

This is all still a work in progress. Happiness goes in and out of focus, as it does for all of us. Cambage says now that she's learned that her triggers are different during the season—that just because she felt fine off her meds during the offseason, that can all change when basketball comes back.

"Life's easy when I'm away from basketball," she says. "I'm not dealing with the media. I'm not dealing with things like that, and I don't stress."

"Now I know that while I'm still living this life, I need help being balanced out and trying to deal with the roller-coaster ride that is being an athlete and a person in the media as well."

As Cambage says now, she is still "day to day. Just focusing on the next day." But she's excited about basketball again—and she was the Aces' leading scorer in three of her first six games back from her break, including a 23-point, 10-rebound performance in an Aug. 18 win that sealed the Aces' playoff spot. "On my birthday," she adds with a laugh.

"It probably didn't show, but I had been struggling for a while in the lead-up to All-Star," she says. "In my head I was full of self-doubt. Now I just stopped stressing over everything and I'm able to play my game and be free."

There are people who would call this high-maintenance, who would stay away from it because of the drama. But loving Liz Cambage is about deciding all this maintenance is probably worth it if it helps her be her best self.

"It's just the old narrative that we should act ladylike and shut up and be happy with what we want," Cambage told me back in July. "It's like, 'I want more.' And I'm going to say what I want, how I feel, stand up for myself. No one's been able to stop me my whole life, and I'm not going to stop any time soon." ■

MICHAEL THOMAS

WIDE RECEIVER, NEW ORLEANS SAINTS
HIGHEST-PAID RECEIVER IN NFL
HISTORY, TWO-TIME PRO BOWLER
AGE 26
6-3, 218 POUNDS

I don't take it for granted to be in the position that I'm in, to play receiver in the National Football League, to be considered one of the best at the position. So I try to leave no stone unturned. I always have that thing in the back of my head that someone's working harder than me. I never want to let anyone do that. **Play in the Super Bowl and win a championship—that's my main goal this year.** I've come very close twice. I don't want to slip up again. So every decision I make, I'm thinking: "Is this going to lead to where I want to be?" **You can't be a great player just sitting on the couch or just talking football or watching football.** I learned a long time ago that you have to have discipline. You have to do the workouts. You have to be consistent. My dad was big into fitness and health, and he instilled that in me early on. He helped me understand what hard work gets you and how that work translates to the football field. —AS TOLD TO STACEY PRESSMAN

Photographed by Peter Hapak on July 12, Los Angeles

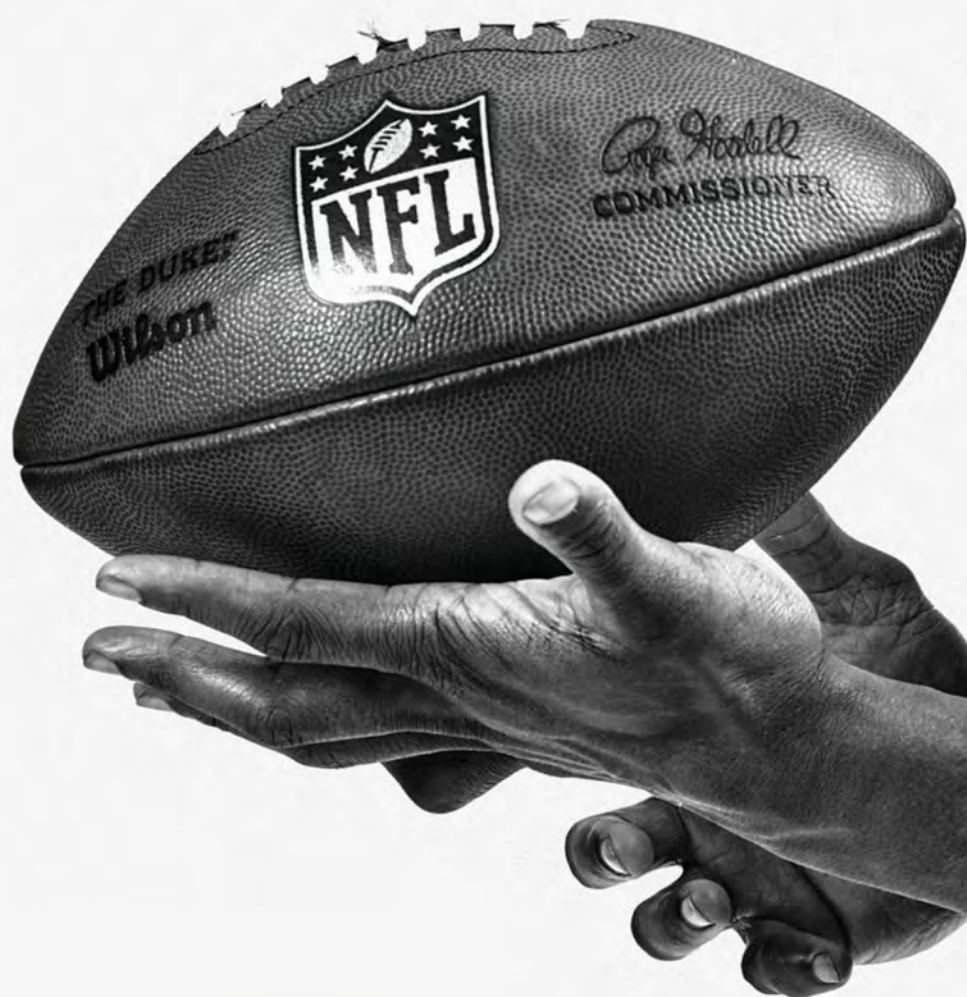
GROOMING BY ERIN SVALSTAD; HAIR BY PATRICK REGAN; PRODUCTION BY LISA MARIA CABRERA/
TENTH AND HUDSON; PROP STYLING BY JOHNNY LONG





**“My plan was always
to be the first
\$100 million receiver.
Some people are afraid
to shoot that high
or be that intentional.”**

MICHAEL THOMAS



BODY 2019





**BODY
2019**

**“I take doubters
real personal.
That’s what got
me to be the
person that I am.
I’m fueled
by everything.”**

MICHAEL THOMAS

REHYDRATE
REPLENISH
REFUEL



GATORADE HAS *CARBS AND ELECTROLYTES*
SO YOU CAN BRING THE HEAT.

AMANDA NUNES

UFC FIGHTER
BANTAMWEIGHT AND FEATHERWEIGHT
CHAMPION, MOST WINS BY
A FEMALE FIGHTER IN UFC HISTORY
AGE 31
5-8, 182 POUNDS

Beating some of the biggest stars in the sport was a huge accomplishment because I was always the underdog. People were always doubting me, and that was the moment to prove it. In the big fights, my coach and I have always been able to put our minds together on only one thing. When I think about those fights, I think, “We did it.” **I started training for MMA when I was 18 years old.** Since that moment, I haven’t stopped. Back then, I lived in the gym. I cleaned the gym. I trained every day. Everything was difficult, but that is a part of this game. Suffer a little bit and then everything’s going to be fine in the end. When you have a dream, you have to follow and train hard. **A lot of fans ask, “Why doesn’t UFC show more Amanda?”** But now I feel like I proved a point: I’m the best in this game. You guys have to look at me. I’m happy with whatever it takes to keep making history, keep making people change their minds. **I’m going to defend both of my belts.** One isn’t better than the other—to be a champion is always to be a champion. Both titles are very special and important for me. People can recognize everything that I’ve done now, and I’m happy for that.

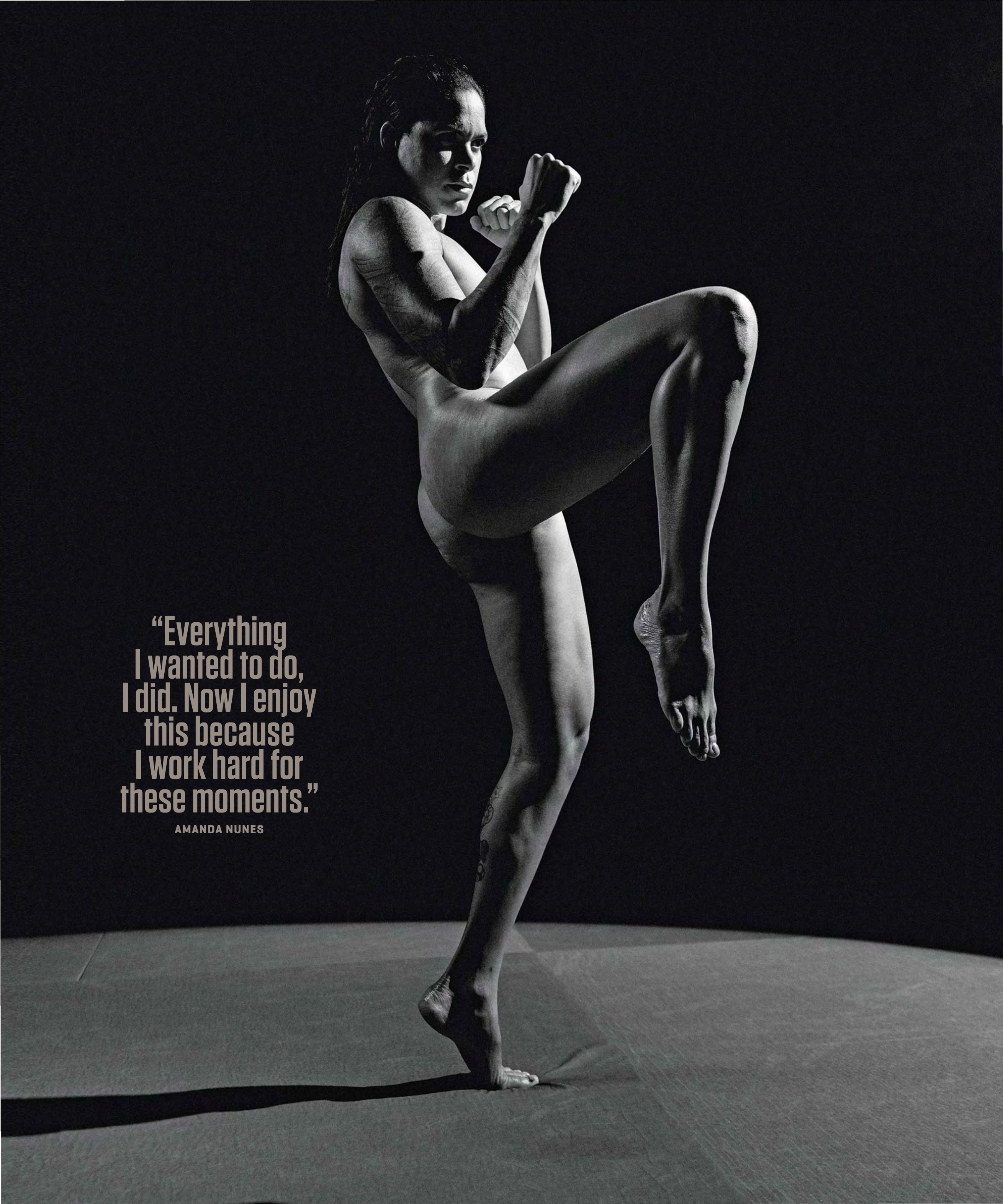
—AS TOLD TO RACHEL ULLRICH

Photographed by Marcus Smith on April 28, Coconut Creek, Fla.

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY KERSTIN JAEGER;
PRODUCTION BY NICOLE HEKTNER







**“Everything
I wanted to do,
I did. Now I enjoy
this because
I work hard for
these moments.”**

AMANDA NUNES



BODY 2019

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behind-the-scenes moments
and interviews at
[ESPN.com/bodyissue](https://www.espn.com/bodyissue).





**“At UFC 200,
it was that
moment to show
everybody:
I’m gay, and I did it.
You can do it
as well. I like to
help people like that,
to show them
what they can do.”**

AMANDA NUNES

THE HIGHEST SUMMIT

BY SETH WICKERSHAM

“DUDE,” ALEX HONNOLD tells me, “you should go in the loft.”

We are standing at the bottom of a ladder leading to a loft above his bedroom in his Lake Tahoe house. This is the second loft Honnold has directed me to on a tour of the place. The other one is in the living room. He grew up climbing into that one, long before he set his sights, as we saw in *Free Solo*, on slightly more ambitious endeavors. Back then—back before Honnold bought the house that had been in his family for decades and remodeled it to his liking—the loft wasn’t really a loft. It was a hidey-hole. More than Alex loved to disappear in it, he loved the beauty of reaching it, the feeling of having conquered something, of elevated air, of being alone and feeling alive.

I climb halfway up the ladder to peer into the loft. It’s carpeted. Sunlit and warm, with a view of the mountains. Honnold’s long-time girlfriend, Sanni McCandless, has plans to use it as a home office for her life-coaching business. A solid loft, as lofts go.

As I head down, Honnold looks at me with earthy brown eyes—earnest, obsessive and in a dead heat with oversized ears as his head’s main point of reference—and utters the most Honnold thing ever. “It’s funny. Nobody ever actually summits the loft. Like, you go halfway, you look, and then you come down. For me, if you start up a staircase, you have to summit. Because I would call that not actually going to the loft.”

OK, fair.

“It’s odd,” he says, “but I’m starting to see that it’s the norm.”

You know what else is odd but now the norm? Two years after he became the first to climb the 3,000-foot El Capitan in Yosemite National Park without a rope or any protective gear, a terrifying and mesmerizing feat that garnered an Oscar and a lifetime of corporate speaking gigs, as well as a





ALEX HONNOLD

ROCK CLIMBER
ONLY CLIMBER TO FREE SOLO
EL CAPITAN, SPEED RECORD
HOLDER ON THE NOSE
OF EL CAPITAN
AGE 34
5-11, 157 POUNDS

Photographed by
Cory Richards on July 20,
Kirkwood Lake, Calif.

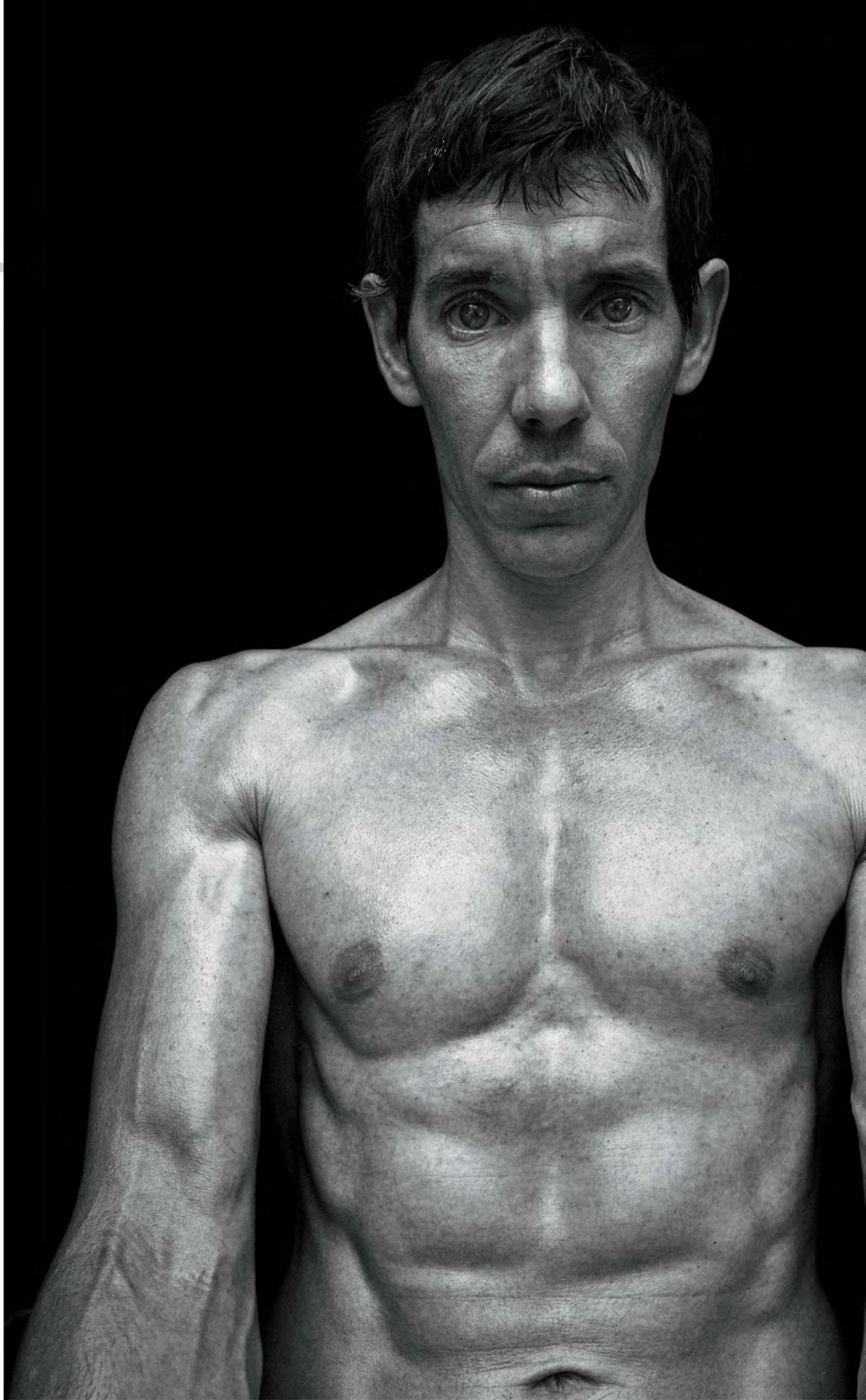
PRODUCTION BY MELISSA SCHNEIDER;
GROOMING BY MARINA RICH

reputation for being indifferent to death, Alex Honnold is talking about summiting a loft, in a beautiful new house he shares with his beautiful longtime girlfriend—not alone or desperate or driving to his next perilous climb in his signature white van.

IF YOU SAW *Free Solo*, you know why this is odd. If you didn't, the film was more than a breathtaking study of what can be accomplished when the body and mind silence the fear of fastening yourself to millimeters of dimpled granite thousands of feet in the air. It was a raw and honest glimpse at the requirements of greatness. Honnold displayed his own version of the traits possessed by so many transcendent athletes—the mix of ambition, ruthlessness, insecurity, selfishness and self-confidence required to go it alone. He kept Sanni at arm's distance through several cringeworthy state-of-the-relationship conversations. He kept obsessive daily notes of each stage of El Cap, committing each pivot to memory. And he lived in a van, devoted to its simplicity. It had everything he needed: a bed, a kitchen, a fridge, a hangboard, room to stretch and contort—he's always stretching and contorting—and most important, the freedom to leave any place or person on a whim.

Any great athlete will tell you the urge to redefine your limits doesn't wane with age. It gets worse, and so conspires against future happiness. Legacies fade, talent diminishes, but the drive to do something great remains. Extreme climbers are so hardwired for the quest that for many, the only way forward is to die on a mountain. Everything else is prelude. In the book *The Impossible Climb*, Tommy Caldwell, one of Honnold's childhood heroes who later helped him train for El Cap, tells author Mark Synnott, "It's hard to say this, but I think Alex will probably just continue doing this until he dies."

Today Honnold is alive and 34 years old. After *Free Solo*'s release, he went on a seven-month victory lap. At the Oscars, Bradley Cooper sought him out to chat. At an after-party, Alex and Sanni saw Mahershala Ali heading their way. Sanni was so eager to meet the actor that she tossed her hors



d'oeuvres on the floor to shake his hand. Honnold toured the country, hit the late-night talk shows, gave speeches, chatted with Julian Edelman about training, spent months in hotel rooms, rode the New York subway, retained his unkempt look—charcoal hair uncombed and angular and subtly punk—and again and again tried to answer honestly when asked, “What’s next?”

The answer, for Honnold, might be more difficult and mysterious than holding himself thousands of feet off the ground. What’s next is to begin a life. A real life, with Sanni and all the blessings and trappings that will give him more to lose on a rock than just his own existence—a life that in some ways begins the orange July morning I arrive in Tahoe, when Honnold has finally moved out of the van and woken up for the first time in his new house.

“DID WE NOT run this?” Honnold says to Sanni, staring at a yawning half-full dishwasher. “They’re still dirty.”

Honnold stands in the kitchen, looking like he just rolled out of bed, because he always looks like he just rolled out of bed. Sanni is at the counter on her laptop. The van sits in the driveway. The house is in a gated community on the shores of Lake Tahoe, which sounds more pretentious than it is. It’s a compound of rustic cabins and houses passed through generations. Honnold grew up spending parts of summers in this place, where his last name matters more than his first. He was the world’s most famous soloist long before *Free Solo*—now he’s the most legendary—but when he rolls up to the longtime security guard at the front gate here, he’d better say he’s at the Honnold House if he hopes to get in.

The Honnold House isn’t his first house. He and Sanni share another one in Las Vegas. But this feels like his first home. They bought in Vegas because it’s a rock climbers’ nirvana, but they stay there so infrequently that Honnold gets calls from realtors offering straight cash for it. The *Free Solo* scenes of them buying in Vegas were striking, his minimalist instincts in overdrive. He offered to sleep on the floor rather than buy a bed. He wanted a small

and unsexy fridge, white plastic instead of stainless steel. After they bought the house, he still slept in—still preferred—the van. Tahoe doesn’t offer much by way of climbing, but it does offer the lakeside sunsets stamped in Honnold’s memory of an otherwise “melancholic” childhood growing up outside Sacramento. He was a smart but socially awkward “dark soul” of a kid, unmotivated except for a love for going *up* things. He bought the family cabin, he says, because he wants it to remain the family cabin.

Now all he has to do is live in it. Honnold woke up this morning grumpy. The bedroom doesn’t yet have window shades, and the sunrise hit him like a spotlight.

“I might sleep better in the van,” he says.

“Not me,” Sanni replies.

Honnold doesn’t like the way the new stainless steel refrigerator opens, so he didn’t eat breakfast for a few hours. But he has perked up. He and Sanni played cribbage on his grandfather’s board. Sanni won, closing the gap on Alex’s lifetime lead—yes, they keep track—to 54–45. Now he’s picking up after a breakfast of leftover Vietnamese food, taking pride in mundane domesticity.

“See, the kitchen’s almost clean,” he says, smiling.

“*Almost* clean,” she says.

Sanni has layered blond hair, symmetrical dimples and eyes that echo the lake. The two met in Seattle years ago, when she attended one of his book signings. It was before El Cap, when he was a precocious climber but not yet a transcendent one. She thought he was cute and smart and weird, and decided to pass him her number. He texted her that night. They met up two weeks later, and that was that. She was fascinating in *Free Solo*, as willing as Alex to risk torment for a life large enough to feel real. Many awkward conversations were captured on film, none more so than when she realized he had chosen a morning to solo El Cap and hadn’t planned to tell her. At one point in the film, he said, “I will always choose climbing over a lady.” Yet here they are, balancing out each other’s crazy. Mostly.

Honnold pulls a glass from the dishwasher and glances at it. They have a set of nice new wineglasses. This one doesn’t match, a

rogue glass that they’d used in the van. Sanni wants to donate it. Honnold doesn’t. He tucks it behind a row of wineglasses. “Look at that,” he says.

“No, it doesn’t go up there,” Sanni says with a slight moan and laugh. “I’m going to notice that forever.”

“I’m not going to notice it at all,” he says.

He tinkers with it, burying it further behind the wineglasses, which slides them dangerously close to the edge of the shelf. “Don’t put the—no, no, no,” she says.

“Now you can’t even tell that it’s a cup,” he says.

“But now I’m going to drop all my wineglasses,” she says.

The house is loaded with land mines. For him: Sanni’s old-school turntable, which sits in the corner with a stack of records. “I think it’s totally stupid,” says Honnold, who has all the music he’ll ever need on his phone. For her: a worn blue recliner, which belonged to Honnold’s grandparents and might be as old as the property.

“I’m probably going to be sitting in that chair forever,” Sanni sighs.

“I know, but it’s a totally nice chair,” Honnold says.

She leaves the room. He putters in the kitchen. There are a few random pens scattered about. His mind whirs. If *Free Solo* taught us anything, it’s that Honnold is a genius at transcending spatial relationships. He pulls the rogue cup from the shelf, fills it with the pens and places it far from the wineglasses. Boom. Peace in our time.

“Oh, look at that,” he says with a proud smile when Sanni returns to the kitchen. “Perfect. So much happier.”

ONCE THE ROCKS cool from the morning sun, today’s plan is to climb. Honnold wants to go to Cascade Cliff, outside of South Lake Tahoe. If he completes Blue Sky Black Clouds, a grade 5.14b—climbing-speak for hard as hell—crack in the cliff, it will be his biggest climbing accomplishment in at least a year.

We’ve got a few hours to kill.

Sanni wants to make the bed before I see the master bedroom, so Honnold steers me to the lofts and then to his version of a home

office: the garage, which will be a climbing gym when finished. It has an inclined climbing board on one wall, and tomorrow a huge moon board—a massive panel with climbing holds—will arrive. He's excited about all his new toys. It's weird to see him proudly look up at an indoor wall he hopes to conquer rather than up at a national landmark.

Honnold's latest goal is to improve his speed on sport climbs and to boost his finger strength. The former is a departure from his patient and methodical soloing style, an attempt to become a more well-rounded climber. The latter seems ludicrous to anyone who watched *Free Solo* and saw his life hanging by a chalked-up knuckle. His fingers, like his body, assert power, gangly but so muscular as to be swollen. You expect his fingers to be worn and callused, like a guitarist's, but he keeps them moisturized to be sensitive enough to feel tiny variations in rock, as if reading Braille. He's never considered himself a great athlete—or even an athlete, for most of his life. He likes football—his team is the 49ers—but was “too contrarian” for team sports growing up. He hates running, hates aimless hiking with huge backpacks and has barely lifted weights. He might have made a decent competitive swimmer, he thinks, only because he hates water so much that he'd hustle to get out of it. But he saw power and potential in the hidden architecture of a rock. It spoke not only to his loner tendencies but to his pathological need to be great at something he could control. “I love the feeling of improvement,” he says. “It's the excitement of newness, even though it's not, you know, impressive.”

The campus board is impressive, with three sets of ledges from which to hang by his fingers: 10 millimeters, 8 millimeters and 6 millimeters. He stands in front of the board and maneuvers his fingers onto the 6 mm ledge, holding on by half a knuckle. He tries to hang and slips off.

“In some ways, I haven't worked hard as a climber,” he says.

It's difficult to take him at his word when he says this, but he offers an entire argument as to why it's true. He believes living in the van for a decade hurt his climbing.

He had no home base, and so he had no home gym. He learned to climb rocks by climbing rocks, often alone. He hasn't climbed regularly in a gym since he was a kid, when his dad, Charles, would take him—moments that are precious in retrospect. Charles died of a heart attack in July 2004, when Alex was a freshman at the University of California at Berkeley, a year after he and Alex's mom, Dierdre Wolownick, divorced. Honnold grew up in a house where family members rarely expressed their love for one another, and there was so little affection that as an adult he had to teach himself how to hug.

When his dad died, Honnold tried to disconnect from the known world—dropping out of college, mostly living in a tent for two years and then the white 2002 Ford van he bought in 2007, climbing rocks, staring at El Cap and imagining the possibilities. He didn't intend to become a soloist, but he became one because at first he was too shy to ask others to come along. Later, as he once wrote in an essay for *Rock and Ice* magazine, it was “because I feared doing something stupid when people were watching.”

Nobody was watching when he came closest to dying. It was Dec. 26, 2004, the first Christmas without his dad. Wearing his father's snowshoes, Honnold decided to hike Mount Tallac, where his family had scattered some of Charles' ashes months earlier. He had never snowshoed before, and he slipped and fell hundreds of feet, tumbling over himself. He woke up in a rocky area, with a broken hand, a badly bruised leg and several chipped teeth. His gloves had torn apart and his thumbs were raw, “as if they'd been sliced with a carrot peeler,” he said after the accident. He called his mom with a cellphone that she'd given him the day before as a Christmas gift and said, “Where am I?” She called 911. A helicopter saved him. More than scared, he was pissed, embarrassed that he had to be rescued. When he recorded the expedition in his notebook—writing with his left hand because his right was too busted up to hold a pen—he called himself a “pussy.”

Ask Honnold about fear and death and, well, he seems tired of discussing fear and

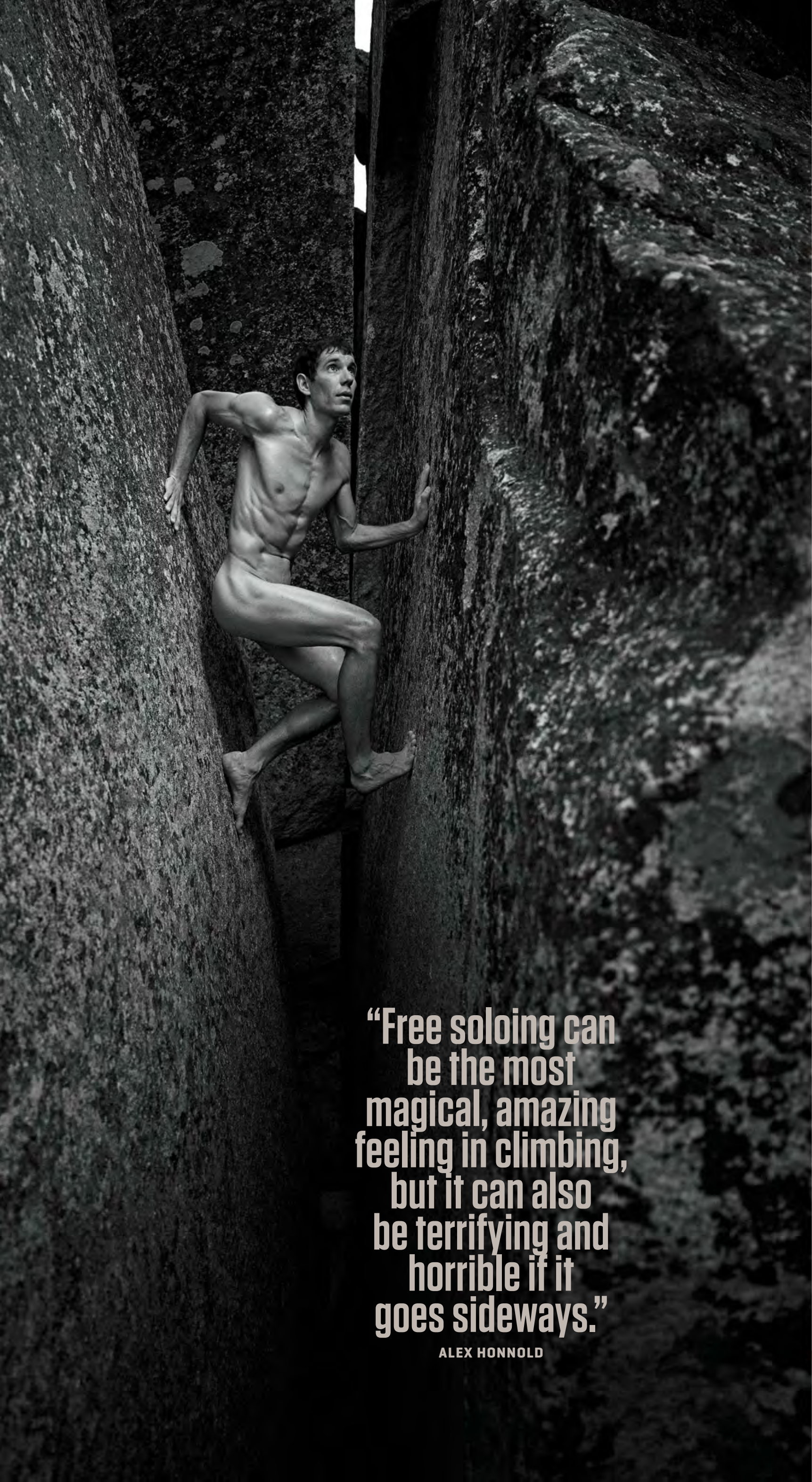
death. It's been posited, of course, that he doesn't feel fear like the rest of us. *Free Solo* introduced the word “amygdala”—the brain's fear center—into the zeitgeist when a brain scan in the film showed that his amygdala is unmoved by experiences that would freak out most of us. He doesn't buy it, though. It's an insult to reduce years of hard work, the long nights spent in his van visualizing every move, to a simple brain scan. He insists he fears just like everyone else—if, say, a crocodile entered his house, he'd freak out—but he's spent so much time alone on cliffs that any anxiety is contained. He was scared of El Cap during most of *Free Solo*, after all. Only at the end did he transcend it.

Death, however—he's always had a complicated relationship with it. It hovers over everything he does, and he picked a numbers game of a profession. Friends have died on rocks, and more will. He's an atheist—“We're all animals,” he says—and his dad's death helped him prepare for his own, should he have slipped on El Cap. You can die doing anything at any time, he says. Life goes on without you. Sanni will find someone new to love. He won't be missed. Dust in the wind. Sanni cried hard the night before he climbed El Cap, wondering if she had seen him for the last time. He didn't cry. He slept. He slept well.

Still, Honnold is processing his dad's death now more than ever, not because El Cap has been summited but because of the house. He feels his dad's presence in it. The headstones for Charles and two of Alex's grandparents are on the property, near a tree with a bird feeder. “In some ways I was too young to appreciate how big of an impact that had, or what the loss actually was,” he says.

“I think you have more empathy now,” Sanni says back in the living room.

“Hmm,” he says, stuffing his reflex to disagree. Honnold had a run in the lead-up to El Cap when he was cruel and impatient—cruelly impatient—with lesser climbers, dismissing them as glorified hikers, especially if they became more conservative after parenthood, as if all children would be as indifferent to their dad's death as Honnold imagined loved ones would be to his own.



“Free soloing can be the most magical, amazing feeling in climbing, but it can also be terrifying and horrible if it goes sideways.”

ALEX HONNOLD

He hid in ice crevasses to fake his own death, scaring friends who were already worried he would die on a climb. He had to psych himself into a warrior mentality of sorts to solo El Cap, a mindset that doesn't travel well off the rock, he's learned.

“I'm definitely more mellow now,” he says.

“Do you feel like you've actually changed your level of empathy or do you feel like you've gotten better at anticipating when empathy should come into play?” Sanni asks.

“I'm memorizing my lines,” he says.

At one point during the morning, he leaves the kitchen and returns with a green spiral notebook, the journal with the El Cap entry. He took notes of each hand and foot maneuver on El Cap and over the course of two years recited them to himself, formatting his mind to trust his body more than his eyes. He flips through the pages until he hits the entry for June 3, 2017—the day of El Cap.

Freerider. 5-12D Solo!!! = 3:59. Felt amazing. Smooth + awesome!

He looks at it for a moment, seeing all the invisible moments of glory and desperation that allowed him to write that simple, historic line. Sanni looks too, over his shoulder, as they scan notes below the El Cap entry, stuff he didn't want me to see. He slaps the notebook shut and puts it away. She sees tiny progress.

“When Alex and I first started dating,” she says, “he wouldn't even let me hold his journal.”

“**SHOULD WE GET** our shizzle together?” Honnold says to Sanni as they sort out their climbing gear. He has his own vernacular. “Shizzle” means stuff. “Dialed” means locked into an endeavor to the point of clinical efficiency—like, flying is easier if you're dialed into TSA Pre-Check. “Pumped” doesn't mean stoked but rather the feeling of his forearms being so flexed during a climb that they swell into bowling pins. (I expect him to have a euphemism for “climbing,” but he always just says ... climbing.) Alex and Sanni fill backpacks with water bottles and a lunch of hummus and bell pepper sandwiches; Honnold avoids meat and almost all processed food,

A full-page photograph of Alex Honnold, a man with dark hair and a focused expression, sitting on a large, dark, textured rock. He is shirtless and wearing dark shorts, looking off to the right. The background shows more of the same rocky terrain under a clear blue sky. The lighting is bright, casting shadows on the rock.

“People keep asking what’s next. They want to hear *Free Solo 2: I’m Going Bigger*. That doesn’t exist. There aren’t bigger walls; there aren’t bigger challenges.”

ALEX HONNOLD



reserving treats like pizza and ice cream for special occasions.

Alex and Sanni joke that they spent the first two years of their relationship in front of the cameras, although it's hard to tell whether they think it's funny. Relationships in their infancy are hard enough without a camera crew—and the urge to scale deadly cliffs is so incompatible with a well-adjusted life that climbers have a phrase for it.

“Angst climbing,” Honnold says in the kitchen.

When Honnold was a teenager, he read *Kiss or Kill*, a collection of essays from climber Mark “Dr. Doom” Twight. The book captures the dark currents and existential suffering that drive many in his profession. Twight called climbing “a tool to forestall suicide.” Honnold dismissed much of Twight's claims as shtick, but he related to elements of the book. In college, he lived off campus and had barely any friends. Two questions swirled in his head, he says: “Why can't I get laid? Why am I so ugly?” He was bright—a straight-A student in high school and in the top 2 percent of the general population on the Mensa IQ test—but he spent all of his time out of class and off campus, climbing nearby Indian Rock. School seemed useless. He first considered joining the military but then thought about a slightly less honorable career. He would see dorm windows left open, with computers within reach, and thought he'd make a good cat burglar. “I used to think, ‘Man, it would take less than 45 seconds to go and grab a laptop and disappear, and nobody would know.’ Seemed like an easy way to make a living.”

He picked climbing instead, dropping out of school and throwing himself into his craft, developing a cult following when in 2007 he became the second person ever to free solo two brutal walls in Yosemite in one day, a 1,100-foot granite pillar named Astro-man and the 800-foot Rostrum, not telling anyone beforehand that he would try them and later mentioning to only one friend that he had succeeded. But he was alone in his van, often in a bad headspace.

“You've done your fair share of angst climbing,” Sanni says in the kitchen, know-

ing that he soloed Rainbow Wall in Red Rocks after a bad breakup.

“Not with you, though,” he says.

“No, but that was always an issue,” she says. “You would always joke, ‘I need angst in my life to do rad things.’ Like, having a happy relationship just makes it harder to get out of bed early and go.”

Honnold wasn't joking. He spent most of his life holding to the belief that achieving greatness is impossible if you're “happy and cozy.” When he and Sanni first started dating, it went so well he felt he needed to create distance, at times manufacturing angst. They had a blowout fight—OK, like most couples they've had a few, including when she lost control of the rope as he was training for El Cap and he fell, reinjuring his back. This fight, though, was in a parking lot. Sanni left the van for good—only she forgot her wallet in it. Honnold tracked her down at San Francisco International Airport and asked her to stay. “Sanni put her foot down firmly on the no on-and-off, so it's just stayed on,” Honnold says.

“To your great disappointment,” she says, laughing.

“In retrospect, you don't really need the drama of blowing stuff up over and over,” he says.

“I don't think it's totally gone,” she says. “In some ways, the roller coaster is—I don't want to say more fun, but ...”

“It's more exciting,” Honnold says. “I've sort of committed myself to a path. And so you just sort of lose that feeling of freedom a bit.”

WE PASS FREEDOM on Highway 50 an hour or so later on the way to the mountain, when Honnold recognizes his old life.

“A climber van!” he says.

There's a white van in the right lane, a spitting image of his own. Shades in back to block the morning sun. Climber bumper stickers. Granola veneer. Caked-on road dirt. After Honnold was profiled by *60 Minutes* in 2012, he was flush with sponsorships, living in his van and accruing only about \$15,000 in annual expenses. Life was good. He comfortably gave a third of his income to his foundation, which brings solar

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power to underdeveloped parts of the world. He upgraded to a new van in 2016, a Dodge Ram Promaster. We are not driving that van right now. We left it in the driveway. We are in a Subaru station wagon. Traffic is heavy, giving us time to discuss the parts of his *Free Solo* persona with which he disagrees.

"Oh, the daredevil," he says.

"The asshole," Sanni says.

"No, no, I don't think that's part of the public persona."

"I think it is."

"I don't know. I don't care. I think the risk taking, daredevil, gives no f---s, that's wildly overblown. People watch *Free Solo* and are like, 'I can't believe you did that thing.' The thing to take away from it is, I can't believe you trained two years to do something that actually only took hours to climb."

Honnold has insisted he doesn't want to die soloing, lest he join the legions of legends who got too cocky, or too depressed, or too unlucky. If fate were to give him a heads-up that it's how he would go, he'd immediately stop. But the rocks will always call, and he's a young man staring at a life of chasing not only his own ghost but also the unmatched rush of absolute perfection under dire consequences. No other climber can relate. An essential part of him seemed to die on El Cap because he survived it. He has more money and fame than he ever dreamed of, two houses, a publicist whose firm's clients include Leo DiCaprio and Natalie Portman, and an entire army of support staff to arrange his work and life. He's neither free nor solo anymore. I ask Honnold for something, like El Cap, that he could now train two years for.

"I don't know."

Parenthood?

"That's only like nine months. And realistically, it's more like a crash course in four months."

"The crash course is more like the first five years," Sanni says, laughing. "Or maybe the first 18 years."

Honnold always imagined himself as a grandfather more than a father, both because he had great relationships with his grandparents and because he knows he will struggle with the intense engagement kids

require. And then there's maybe another reason, which Caldwell once explained so eloquently that Honnold included it in his autobiography, *Alone on the Wall*: "On one hand I am still a kid, full of wonder, chasing dreams of distant summits. But I'm also a father—and this means I am no longer allowed to die."

Not being allowed to die is different from studying a daunting wall to minimize the chances of death. In *Free Solo*, Honnold said if he had "an obligation to maximize my life span"—a family—he'd give up soloing. He is resolute that he wants to be a great dad. "But it's a few years off," he says now.

The question of kids, of course, raises the question of marriage. It's easy to imagine Honnold in a permanent committed relationship, or whatever he'd call it, but leaving himself an escape hatch. I feel semi-guilty that my nose is *waaaaay* in their business, but I go there. I ask about marriage. Well, sort of. I backdoor it by asking Honnold how he feels about the institution of it. He sees right through it. So does Sanni.

"That's up to him," she says.

"I don't mind jumping through hoops," he says. "Yeah, I'm down with it."

There's a comfortable small talk in the car as we wind through the mountains. Sanni has transformed herself with and because of Honnold, not only going from a novice to an excellent climber in her own right but also absorbing the sport as a part of her life, as essential to her days as coffee, the way good partners do. She turns to Alex: "What's one of my hobbies you do now?"

"Talking about my feelings."

WE CAN HEAR Honnold breathe from 50 feet down.

He's on his last climb of the day, making his way up Blue Sky Black Clouds. The cliff extends out, like a V, as if climbing up the backside of a staircase. Honnold estimates that only a handful of climbers have finished Blue Sky, in part because the approach to the wall is a brutal hike—no trails, just hundreds of yards of sharp rock and bramble, sizzling from the sun and at altitude. We hiked most of it together

before I got winded and valiantly let Honnold and Sanni go on without me, vowing to catch up. It took awhile. I got lost and ended up sliding down 20 yards of rocks on my rear to get back on track. When I finally reached the cliff, Honnold asked through a wry grin, "Did you have a hole in the ass of your shorts before this?" Fortunately, the audience privy to the hole is small: A few of Honnold's friends are up here, including Charlie Barrett, who writes rock climbing guides and who's now belaying Alex.

Honnold is shirtless and exhausted—sorry, *pumped*. His breaths are heavy and deliberate, reminiscent of the eeriest and most insane scenes in *Free Solo*, when it was silent except for Honnold's labored breathing and the snapping wind and you could almost feel his heartbeat. Muscles carve up his back and arms into a primal topography, as he flashes all his famous climbing strokes, the slow and precise hand movements, the calculated pauses to re-chalk his hands and to ponder the next inconceivable twist to an unreachable spot, his 90-degree leg kicks and full-on splits at maximum exposure, a slight body so powerful it seems to bend slabs of granite to his will.

"Ahhhh!!!" he yells as he reaches.

His shout echoes around the valley.

"Come on," Barrett yells. "Come on!"

"Ahhhhh!" Honnold gasps short and sharp, as if he's vomiting.

"Come on, Alex!" Sanni says.

"Ahhhhh!"

"Trust it," Barrett says.

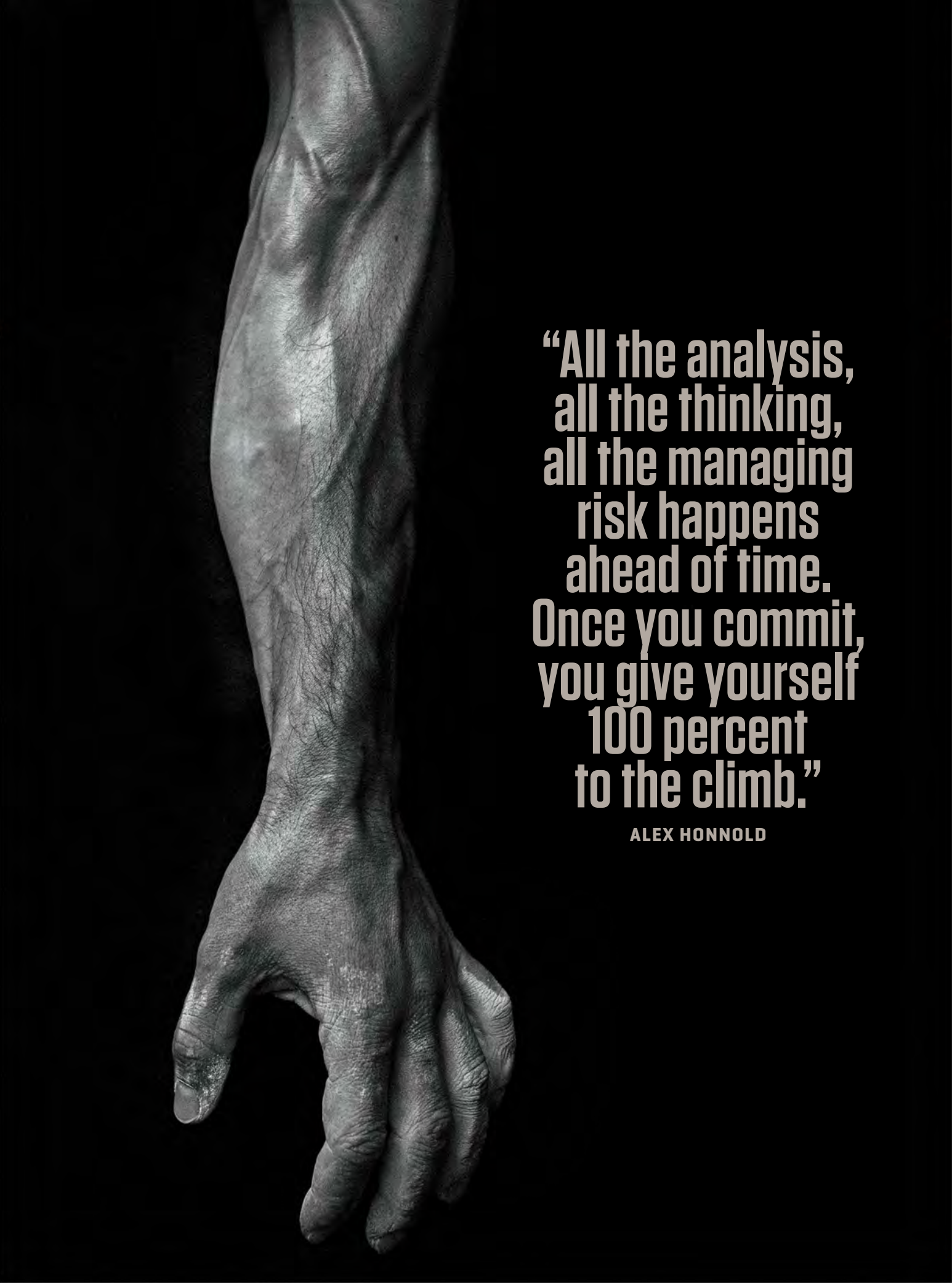
"You got it, come on!" Sanni says.

Honnold jerks himself back and forth, testing each grip before he makes a move, the way he did when rehearsing El Cap. His face transforms when he climbs, any veil of cute goofiness yielding to a concentration so pure and intense it's frightening, his eyes wide and almost black.

"F---!" Honnold yells as he makes his final reach, horizontal on the cliff.

"Woo-hoo!" Sanni calls out. "Woo-hoo!"

He did it. He smiles and dangles from the rope, 75 or so feet high, and unties his shoes. He is belayed down, like cargo, and when his feet touch the ground, he smiles



**“All the analysis,
all the thinking,
all the managing
risk happens
ahead of time.
Once you commit,
you give yourself
100 percent
to the climb.”**

ALEX HONNOLD

and raises his pumped arms into a body-builder's flex. His chest is sweaty, his hands white and rough—he punctured a hole in one of his fingers on the climb—but he's happy. Others could climb this cliff faster and prettier—indeed, when he watches video of it later he's surprised at how slow he was—but he just climbed something he's never done before. It was a milestone, even if it won't be featured at a film festival, and as always, he responds to throttled fear with throttled enthusiasm. After he summited El Cap, he said he was “so delighted.” Today's climb was, he says, “pretty satisfying.”

Alex and Sanni cuddle on the rocks, eating peanut butter pretzels, breathing in fresh air. We've spent all day talking about beginnings and endings, what's gained and lost when something goes away. He reduced El Cap to a series of manageable moves, and he's doing the same to life after it. He has this climb, on this day, with these people, in this elevated air, with his empathy lines memorized and the dishes clean.

He turns to Sanni.

“Ready to go home?” he says.

Sanni is ready.

“Does this mean we can stop for ice cream?” she asks.

“Or we could just drive past the ice cream and think about how we could have gotten it,” Honnold says. “Just as satisfying.”

Not really.

“Pizza sounds really good,” she says a little later.

He hugs her tight.

“No,” he says sweetly.

“Please?”

He hugs her tighter.

“No.”

THE NEXT MORNING, we go inside the van. We're in his driveway, waiting for a delivery truck. Honnold grabs the door handle and gives it a pull. It's weirdly dark. It smells like the woods. The fridge, the stove and the bed are all there but sitting cold. It's like entering a famous movie set after the picture has wrapped. The van still has gear and clothes scattered about. The red shirt and black pants he wore on El Cap are here, but he threw away the shoes after they broke at the seams, memorabilia that should have been immortalized in a museum. There are a few pictures on the walls, warping at the edges, including one of him and Sanni at Red Rocks, on what he believes was their first date. The hangboard, banged up and so white from chalk it looks like it's aging, is still right above the door, where he would do pullups and hang from two fingers for hours, just himself and a dream. The van was a place of habits formed, both historic and unhealthy. We sit inside and he slides the door closed, revealing an etch in the dark interior paneling. It's of El Cap. Mason Earle, the famous climber who lived for a decade in a van of his own, scratched it for Honnold before Honnold soloed it. It's beautiful and impressionistic, all of the cracks and shadows perfectly detailed, staring at him as he lies in bed, daring him to try. The van feels essential to Honnold's being. There's no way he could ever part ways with it, right?

“I could,” he says. “The van is a tool.”

Your kids might want it someday, I say.

“I'm not really into mementos,” he says.

“But who knows.”

His phone rings. His face lights up.

“It's here!” he says.

A huge white moving truck pulls up,



containing his new moon board.

"I'm so excited," he says. "It's like Christmas."

The deliveryman is older, unshaven, very chatty and a little out there. He opens the truck and reveals a massive box, shaped like a king-sized mattress. He knows he's delivering climbing gear, but he doesn't appear to know to whom—that it's, you know,

the *Free Solo* guy. The deliveryman mentions he was a climber back in the day.

"I climbed El Cap once," he says.

"Oh yeah?" Honnold says.

"Almost died."

"Yeah?"

"A fun time," he says.

The deliveryman didn't die. Honnold didn't die. It was a fun time. Now they're

both here, moving a big box that requires two lifting carts. Honnold pulls and I push, but we can't make it to the garage. The driveway path isn't clear. He leaves for a moment, disappearing into his house. I stand with the deliveryman, chatting as he taps his foot, before we turn to the sound of an engine firing up and see Honnold wheeling the van out of the way. **E**

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BODY 2019

LAKEY PETERSON

PRO SURFER
2018 WSL RUNNER-UP, 2012 WSL
ROOKIE OF THE YEAR, FIRST WOMAN
TO PULL AN AERIAL IN COMPETITION
AGE 24
5-7, 132 POUNDS

The first time I surfed was in Manly Beach, Australia. When I was 5, my parents took me and my brother and sister out of school for a year, and we just traveled around the world. We stayed in Manly Beach for about a month of that trip and did a summer camp. **Getting to see the world at such a young age set me up for what I do now.** I go all over the world all year long, and I find myself going back to a lot of places we went on that trip. It's kind of weird; it's almost like my parents knew that I was going to be doing this. **I don't know if my first surf totally swept me off my feet, but I've always connected with the ocean.** Around age 11, my neighbor and his dad would go surfing every day, so I started going with them. Gradually, I was like, "Whoa, this sport is insane. This is so much fun; it feels so natural." I signed up for a few contests and went pro as a teenager. **I was only 14 when I landed a frontside air in competition.** I was so young, I didn't have any idea that girls weren't doing that, or that it hadn't been done. I saw all of these boys doing it, and I surfed with boys from a young age. So I wasn't hindered by the fact of, like, "Oh, girls don't do this." No, surfers do it. This is what you do as a surfer. —AS TOLD TO RACHEL ULLRICH

Photographed by Sarah Lee on June 13, Santa Barbara, Calif.

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY ERIN SVALSTAD; PRODUCTION BY LIZ KOMROY/3STAR PRODUCTIONS



BODY 2019

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behind-the-scenes moments
and interviews at
[ESPN.com/bodyissue](https://www.espn.com/bodyissue).







“I always say, ‘If I’m
not falling in practice,
I’m not progressing.’”

LAKEY PETERSON





“Riding a wave is this emotionless,
beautiful thing. It just brings
you so into the present. It makes
you feel really alive.”

LAKEY PETERSON

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- ☐ Write a check.
- ☐ Practice.
- ☐ Practice.
- ☐ Ignore other sports.
- ☐ Focus on soccer.
- ☐ Drop town's rec league.
- ☐ Sign up for travel league.
- ☐ Write a check.
- ☐ Travel.
- ☐ Give up weekend obligations.
- ☐ Travel.
- ☐ Sign up for camp.
- ☐ Write a check.
- ☐ Sign up for camp.
- ☐ Write a check.
- ☐ Sign up for elite camp.
- ☐ Write a big check.
- ☐ Sign up for elite team.
- ☐ Write a check.
- ☐ Sign up for a private trainer.
- ☐ Write another check.
- ☐ Write another check because you think it's good for your kid.
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- ☐ Write a check.
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SHIFT CHANGE

BY MARTENZIE JOHNSON

A COUNTRY CLUB is a peculiar place to meet Evander Kane, one of the NHL's few black players. The San Jose Sharks left winger even gives me an ironic nod as the two of us, young black men, sit down to discuss racism and diversity at one of the whitest and most segregated institutions.

Everything about the Marine Drive Golf Club in Vancouver is a lesson in wealth and luxury. A sign up the road advertises that only—only!—five mansions and estates are available in a nearby housing community. The club's porte cochere is so big it could fit a semitruck under it. The grand wooden staircase resembles the one Jack walked down to meet Rose in *Titanic*, transporting visitors to the many amenities that warrant entrance fees of 75,000 Canadian dollars (\$56,000) and monthly dues of 335 Canadian dollars (\$250).

Kane likes it here all the same. It's where the NHL's resident renegade knows he can stay out of trouble and avoid negative headlines. He became a member last summer, and on this day the club is empty, save for a few employees and some elderly white men playing a round of golf.

"You wonder, well, if I didn't play hockey or if I didn't make this amount of money or I wasn't who I am ...," Kane says, looking out onto the club greens. "I know in the back of my mind this isn't how it normally goes."

Last year Kane signed a seven-year contract extension with the Sharks worth \$49 million. He is, he believes, Marine Drive's sole black member. The golf course has become his escape. It's only a few hundred feet from his family's home, and it's become the place where he feels most comfortable speaking about incidents that are unique to someone who looks like him.

Take, for instance, the one he says happened five years ago. On a freezing February day in downtown Winnipeg, Kane, then

EVANDER KANE

LEFT WINGER, SAN JOSE SHARKS
CAREER-HIGH 30 GOALS IN
2018-19, 2009 WORLD JUNIOR
CHAMPIONSHIPS GOLD MEDALIST
AGE 28
6-2, 210 POUNDS

Photographed by
Marcus Eriksson on
July 2, Vancouver

PRODUCTION BY SEAN FRITH;
GROOMING BY MARIA WALTON

**“Saying hockey is for everybody is great,
but specifically, getting more black kids involved
in hockey is going to help grow the game.”**

EVANDER KANE





in his second season with the Jets, stopped at a traffic light, and another car pulled alongside his Chevrolet. The three white men inside recognized him and tried to get his attention. When Kane ignored them, one of the men rolled down his window and spit on Kane's car.

"I'm like, 'Are you f---ing kidding me?'" Kane says.

Furious, Kane says he zoomed ahead when the light turned green, pulled his car in front of the agitators and got out to confront the group. One of the men emerged from the car, then placed his hand near the back of his pants, insinuating that he had a firearm. While Kane says he was "95 percent" sure the man was unarmed and just trying to scare him, he quickly realized that despite the overwhelming urge to "go over there and throw him through his own windshield," he couldn't risk beating up some random man, or worse, getting shot. Kane returned to his car and drove away.

As Kane recounts the story, looking out onto the 18th green, his voice is calmer than one might expect, in part because this isn't the only incident he's endured, or the only one he wants to share.

He understands—he lives—the gravity of it all, of being a black athlete in a white man's world. And given a platform here on these 105 acres of land just minutes and yet a world away from where he grew up, he's ready to embrace the responsibility that comes with bearing the truth.

"I think if you're in an element where you can be your true self... you're able to just walk freely," says Gaurav Shukla, Kane's business manager and longtime friend, who has been beside the hockey star through some of his toughest moments on and off the ice.

"I think he's walked on eggshells long enough."

HOCKEY IS AS white as the snowcapped North Shore Mountains in western Canada. Estimates vary, but the NHL is assumed to be at least 90 percent white, made up mostly of white Canadians and Americans and Eastern Europeans. From team owners to coaches to players to media members, as the old joke goes, the only

thing that's black is the puck.

Kane doesn't resemble a stereotypical hockey player. Beyond the obvious, he has all his teeth. At 6-foot-2 and 210 pounds, Kane is imposing, but add in his caramel skin, long and curly 'fro, gladiator muscles and sleeve tattoos that go from his wrist to his elbow and he is not only a large man but a man with presence.

He finds that many people assume the worst. If they don't think he's a threat, they think he's an athlete, though strangers usually guess basketball or football—anything but the sport he plays. "They won't even think about hockey," he says. "They'll be talking about pingpong, cricket, rugby."

He doesn't pay much attention to how his physique is received, but he's super aware of what his skin color connotes.

He gives a hypothetical: If Penguins star Sidney Crosby were to blow up at the media, it would be laughed off. But if Kane were to do it: "That stigma of an angry black man or pissed-off black man or unhappy black guy," he says, "that kind of makes people wary."

His father, Perry, taught him at an early age that he'd have to be twice as good to get half as far as his white teammates. Evander was on skates at 3 years old, gliding around the ice and shooting pucks at a wall near his home in Vancouver. When he was school-age, he woke up at 5:30 every morning to train for an hour before the first bell rang. After classes, he practiced at least three times a week with his school teams.

Kane loved hockey, loved how much better he was at it than everyone else. And he loved to prove his doubters wrong, or in his words, "shove it up their ass."

But no matter how good he was, he was a target. He remembers that at 10 years old, during the second period of a tournament game in which he'd already scored a hat trick, he went to the penalty box for an infraction. Parents approached the glass and laid into the preteen. *We should chop your f---ing legs off. F--- you. Somebody's going to knock your head off.*

He neither flinched nor cried. Instead, he says, he laughed: "In a way, it fueled me." Kane would go on to score two more goals and, after the fifth, take a bow at center ice.

“The mindset is you have to outperform everybody three to four times what they’re doing just to get the same sort of evaluation that the other kids are going to get,” Kane says. “When I look back and I think about all the extra work I did compared to some of the other kids, there’s a reason I was able to make it to the NHL at 18 years old.”

HOCKEY HAS ALWAYS been stained by racism. Tony McKegney, an Afro-Canadian from Montreal, signed with the Birmingham Bulls of the now-defunct World Hockey Association in 1978 but never played for the Bulls after owner John Bassett reneged on the deal because season-ticket holders threatened to boycott the team. Val James, who joined the Buffalo Sabres in 1982 and became the first African American to play in the NHL, was once subjected to a monkey doll with a noose around its neck. Current and former black NHL players P.K. Subban, Joel Ward, Kevin Weekes and Wayne Simmonds have each had racial epithets and/or bananas lobbed at them while on the ice.

The Atlanta Thrashers drafted Kane fourth overall in 2009. While Kane has only good things to say about Atlanta—he once brought hockey equipment to kids at an all-black private school who’d never played the sport; the kids loved it—he says his race became a factor when the franchise relocated to Winnipeg before the 2011-12 season.

There was the time during the 2012-13 NHL lockout when Kane posed for an Instagram photo in Las Vegas holding up stacks of cash as if they were a telephone—a money phone, if you will. It was a nod to boxer Floyd Mayweather and rapper 50 Cent, the Alexander Graham Bells of currency telecommunications. But Kane was criticized for not being more cognizant of Jets employees who weren’t being paid during the lockout, even though it was the owners who had locked out the players. He notes the hypocrisy he saw when the Indiana Pacers’ T.J. McConnell, a white NBA player, was photographed doing the same pose in July: “What was the difference? He plays a different sport and he’s a different color.”

In 2013, he shaved the letters “YMCMB”—short for Young Money Cash Money Billion-





For more stories
at the intersection
of race, sports
and culture, visit
TheUndeclared.com.

aires, the then-record label of rappers Lil Wayne, Nicki Minaj and Drake—into his head. This became a media fascination, even though it was just a 21-year-old hip-hop fan wanting a cool design. “We’ve got guys on our team that got ponytails. What’s the difference? Is that a race thing? Is that a culture thing? I think it’s both.”

“He’s just a big personality, and I think that can rub people the wrong way,” says former teammate Joe Thornton. “I like different. I don’t like the same guy being the same. I want unique personalities.”

In 2014, Kane was chastised again, by media and fans, for posing with wads of cash, this time for doing pushups with stacks of money on his back. This, he says, was a troll job to illustrate how easily he fields negative criticism. “I’m looking at it like, ‘Well, it’s because I’m black. It has to be, it has to be,’” Kane says. “I mean, the article [in the Canadian newsmagazine *Maclean’s*] that came out: ‘Winnipeg is the most racist city in Canada.’ You can dispute it, but that’s how I felt.

“Everything I said, you’ll probably have a bunch of people that will disagree with everything, but I’d be hard-pressed to find somebody who looks like me that disagrees with what I’ve said in the past.”

During his time in Winnipeg, Kane felt he was dodging accusations at almost every turn. He says people accused him of stealing an elderly woman’s dog, swiping \$500 worth of groceries from an area Safeway and regularly dining and dashing at Winnipeg restaurants. “A f---ing restaurant? What the f--- do I need to walk out on a f---ing restaurant bill for?”

There have been more serious allegations. In 2016, Kane was accused of grabbing a woman by the throat and trying to push her into his car outside a Buffalo bar, according to a police report. Kane denied the charge and four months later agreed to a plea deal that didn’t include an admission of guilt. A judge later dismissed the case.

In December 2015, in a complaint filed in the state Supreme Court in New York, Kane was accused of battering a 21-year-old woman in a Buffalo hotel. After a three-month investigation, prosecutors declined to press

charges, finding “no evidence to support the filing of a criminal action.” In July 2016, the woman filed a civil suit against Kane, saying he had caused “serious emotional trauma” and “serious, permanent and painful personal injuries.” Two months later, Kane countersued, alleging his character had been harmed by the woman’s allegations. These cases are still pending. The woman’s lawyer did not respond to ESPN’s requests for comment.

Kane, who maintains his innocence, thinks the fact that he’s black and the woman who sued him is white had everything to do with some hateful social media comments he received about the allegations. “It was the last thing I thought I would ever be a part of,” he says. “And it’s unfortunate that people do create these automatic opinions based on a headline.”

The past few years have baffled and exasperated him and reinforced his sense of otherness, both on and off the ice. “I’m a black hockey player in a white sport with white coaches, white general managers, white owners, white commentators,” he says. “Whether the intent is there or not, there’s some sort of bias.”

He feels it’s time for him to expose it.

Then counter it.

AT THE MARINE Drive Golf Club, Kane’s suggestions for the future of the NHL burst out of him like air from the lungs of a free diver. He wants the league to identify and cultivate a black fan base. He wants the league to highlight black hockey trailblazers like Willie O’Ree, Herb Carnegie and Grant Fuhr. He wants the league to embrace personalities, much like the NBA and NFL have. Kane grew up a fan of the Atlanta Falcons and Philadelphia 76ers because he loved Michael Vick and Allen Iverson, whose personas were as large as their games.

Kane has yet to formally address his ideas with the league, but he’s embraced the concept of being “more than an athlete,” recognizing that his veteran status now earns him a good deal of cachet. His dad always told him that the only way to get respect was to “put the puck in the net.” He’s done that—he’s increased his goal total in each of the

four years since leaving Winnipeg (from 20 in ’15-16 to 30 last season)—but now he wants more than respect. He wants to broaden the game’s appeal.

“Seeing a player like Evander raise his hand and say ‘I want to do more’ shows we are moving in the right direction,” says Kim Davis, the NHL’s executive VP of social impact, growth initiatives and legislative affairs. “The ability for our players to show individuality and for our sport to be open to diverse external expression, while remaining true to the culture of hockey, is critical.

“This is going to be an evolution, not a revolution.”

In recent years, the NHL has attempted to eradicate racism from the game, expanding its multicultural “Hockey is for Everyone” campaign and immediately handing out severe punishments to fans and players who use slurs or harass players.

The campaign has run into stumbling blocks. In August, Hockey is for Everyone was supposed to host a player ambassador summit in Washington, D.C., with the league’s 29 black players and representatives from all 31 NHL clubs, but the event was abruptly canceled. Davis says that because of conflicting player schedules, her department moved the event to a later date. Still, Kane was bothered by the missed opportunity. He says the league’s black players will need to do more as well. I ask him if there’s any relationship among them. He says most worry about risking their careers by speaking out more bluntly about hockey’s race problem.

“You’re wary about stepping outside and doing something that might disrupt the norm,” he says. “I’m not saying it’s like a Colin Kaepernick situation, but you look at that situation, he’s been blacklisted from the league. If all the black hockey players started doing something together, I don’t know what would happen. I don’t know how people take that.”

Kane is afraid of risking career opportunities too, but in his mind, the lack of diversity and resulting racism are the bigger problems. For instance, in the second round of the 2019 playoffs, when the Sharks played the Avalanche in Colorado in Game 3, Kane found himself serving two minutes in the

penalty box for high-sticking. (He led the league with 153 penalty minutes last season.) That's when an Avalanche fan yelled at him: "Go play basketball!"

"Would I like to grab that guy and pump both of his eyes shut?" Kane says. "Absolutely. But I'm held to a higher standard."

Kane alerted a referee and his agent but says he never heard back from the league. An NHL spokeswoman says the Sharks and Avalanche were aware of the situation, but the incident didn't make it to the attention of the league's front office.

It's this indifference that has led Kane to step out from hockey's hermit crab-like ecosystem. He made the trip to the ESPYS this year, appeared on *Sports Illustrated's* Fashionable 50 list and posed for the Body Issue. One could easily write off Kane's campaign as the actions of a self-indulgent millennial wanting more attention for himself. Kane doesn't dispute this. "I don't see a problem with that," he says. "I don't know why anybody would. I think all that does at the end of the day is—everybody talks about growing the game. That's not just on the ice. A lot of growing the game has to do with off the ice."

Kane will defend the game he loves to the ends of the earth. (Just ask Jaguars defensive back Jalen Ramsey, who said last year that he could make an NHL lineup after practicing for six months. Kane then told ESPN, "I think I'd be about 1,000 percent times better at his position in six months than he'll be at mine.") But he worries that if the NHL doesn't adapt to the era of branding, reality television and Instagram, it will continue to be considered the little brother among major American sports. "How is there a cornhole game on ESPN," he says, "but the first round of the [NHL] playoffs, they got a series on the Golf Channel?"

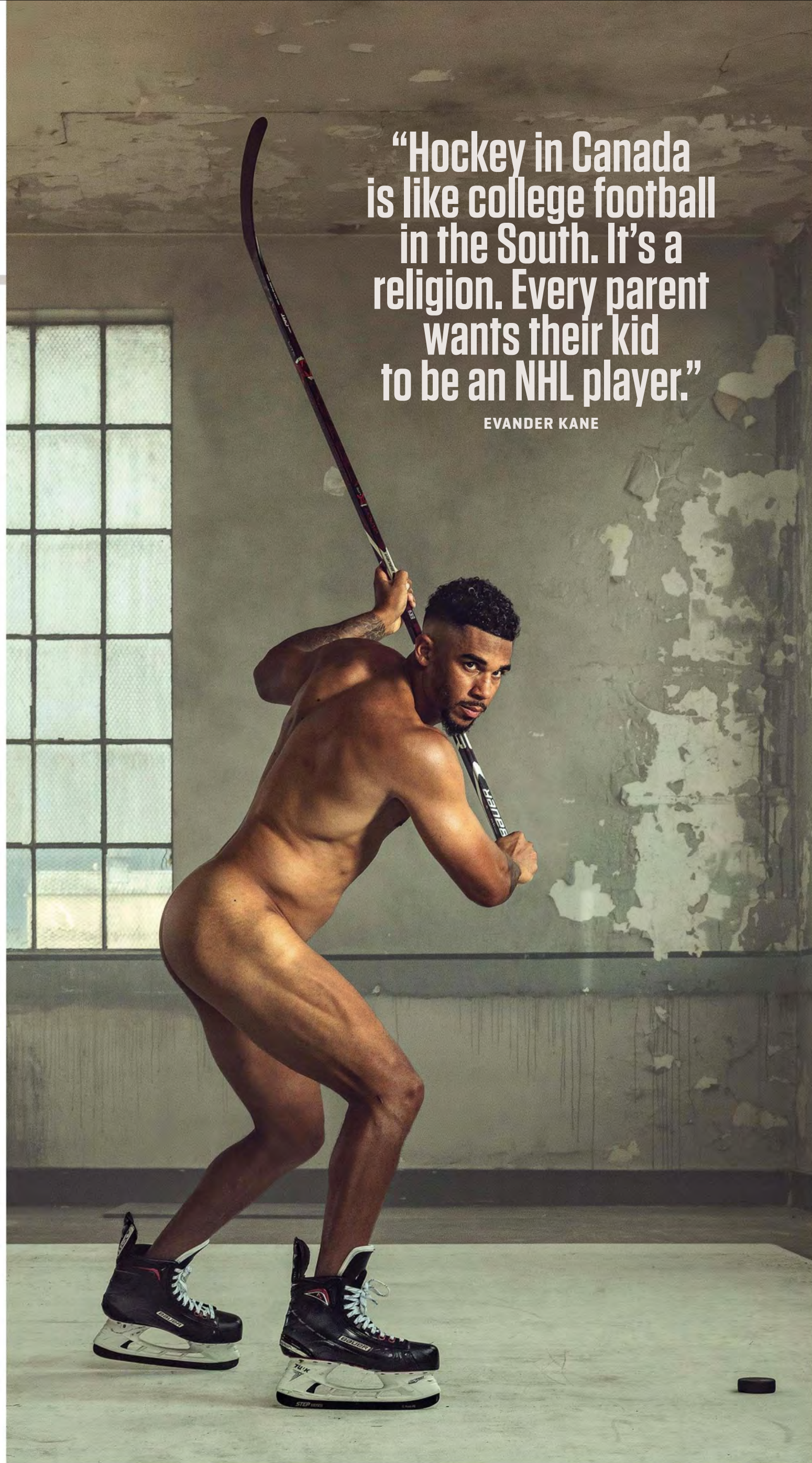
This infuriates him, but it also motivates him. He realizes that he's an imperfect messenger, but as it stands, he appears to be the only one willing to take the risk of speaking out against the faceless old guard.

"I've been in the league long enough, I'm more than established, and I'm just kind of fed up," he says, seemingly more comfortable in his own skin than he's ever been.

"I want to help change the game." **E**

**"Hockey in Canada
is like college football
in the South. It's a
religion. Every parent
wants their kid
to be an NHL player."**

EVANDER KANE





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5-10, 154 POUNDS

Basketball is the greatest love story of my life. I fell in love at 10, and I'm still involved at 61. I've played in the streets. I played in the WNBA at 39 and then came back and played in the WNBA at 50. I have eked out everything I can from this body. **In 1986, I was sitting in my house crying because I thought, "Here I am, one of the best players in the world, and I have no place to play."**

There was no women's pro league. Then I got a call from a guy: "I'm with the Springfield Fame, and we'd like you to play for us." I was like, "The men's league?" Within days, I was in a uniform, playing in an arena at the birthplace of basketball. **It was important for me to be part of the WNBA's inaugural season.** I called them and I said, "I'll go to a local tryout. I'll go wherever you want. Just give me a chance." **I remember telling David Stern many years ago that I'd love an opportunity to coach in the NBA.** But I had to show people I was dedicated and not, "Hey, I'm Nancy Lieberman, you should be giving me this." **Not enough women are true to themselves.** I'm a mom. I've been a housewife, an athlete, a commentator, a coach. We can have it all.

—AS TOLD TO STACEY PRESSMAN

Photographed by Ramona Rosales on Jan. 10, Dallas

HAIR BY KOHL FAULKNER; MAKEUP BY SARAH DOWNS; PROP AND SET DESIGN BY ASHLEY LEE/ON SET MANAGEMENT; MOVEMENT COACHING BY NATALLI REZNIK

BODY 2019

**“It took my breath away
that the game could
honor a woman. I didn’t
see myself up there
with Wilt Chamberlain
and Jerry West. Now I’m
in the same Hall.”**

NANCY LIEBERMAN

LIVE LIKE
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A full-page photograph of Nancy Lieberman, a professional basketball player, posing against a dark background. She is nude, showcasing her muscular physique, particularly her well-defined abdominal muscles. She is smiling and looking upwards, balancing a basketball on her right index finger. Her left hand is resting on her right arm. The lighting highlights the contours of her muscles.

**“I’m big on abs. I would
have situp contests
with my son TJ—that’s
how we would determine
who did chores
around the house.”**

NANCY LIEBERMAN



Find more photos,
behind-the-scenes moments
and interviews at
[ESPN.com/bodyissue](https://www.espn.com/bodyissue).

BODY 2019

EAGLES OFFENSIVE LINE
SUPER BOWL LII WINNERS

BRANDON BROOKS

GUARD
AGE 30
6-5, 350 POUNDS

LANE JOHNSON

TACKLE
AGE 29
6-6, 320 POUNDS

JASON KELCE

CENTER
AGE 31
6-3, 284 POUNDS

ISAAC SEUMALO

GUARD
AGE 25
6-4, 320 POUNDS

HALAPOULIVAATI VAITAI

TACKLE
AGE 26
6-6, 325 POUNDS

What—or who—made you want to do the Body Issue this year?

BROOKS: Lane came to us asking about it, and I didn't mind helping Lane out. Whatever for the squad.

VAITAI: Lane said, "You know we're doing the Body Issue deal." I was like, "What? This is where we get naked?"

JOHNSON: There's a stigma behind the O-line body, but as you can see, these guys are well-built, strong guys. I wanted to put that out there.

As offensive linemen, your job is to protect the QB. What does that responsibility mean to you?

JOHNSON: The O-line position is one of the hardest in sports. With defensive linemen, if they make one sack, their day is made. We can have 70 great plays of executing and you give up one sack or one hit. That's just really frustrating.

What do you hope people take from your shoot?

KELCE: One of the cool things about football is that there's a place for every kid to play, regardless of size, shape or speed. I hope they'll take away that we're some fun guys just having a good time together.

VAITAI: My body may not be the best-looking, but it does get the job done. [Laughs] It gets the job done.

—AS TOLD TO RACHEL ULLRICH

Photographed by Andrew Hetherington on June 6, Philadelphia

SET DESIGN AND PROP STYLING BY BRIAN CRUMLEY; GROOMING BY DANIELLA SHACHTER AND AVA MIHALEJICH





BODY
2019





“I think offensive line play in general is a position of service. You don’t really have stats or the glory of scoring touchdowns. It’s not about you, it’s about the unit, and that’s a unique position.”

JASON KELCE

“People come and go all the time in football. I wanted to capture this moment and these guys so we can maybe look back one day and smile.”

LANE JOHNSON





SONGS OF SUMMER

BY WRIGHT THOMPSON

THE ANNUAL CROSSFIT Games is a revival meeting for all the various tribes who worship at the altar of self-improvement through pain. Endless subcultures are on display: veterans raising awareness about PTSD and post-deployment reintegration, posers wearing MultiCam to the merch tent as if they might have to hide from the Taliban in the tank top aisle, butch lesbians and stroller moms, women with tattoos of wings on their shoulders and, of course, guys who didn't even bring a shirt. Those who do manage to cover their wondrous gifts rep every ideology you can imagine: gay pride shirts with rainbow barbells, "Jesus Saves Bro" shirts and, less obviously, a lot of Iceland gear. The Reebok store sells Iceland shirts, and so does the Rogue tent across the midway.

The women of the tiny island nation are disproportionally great at CrossFit. Iceland, with 340,000 people, has four women in the top 20 at the CrossFit Games. The United States, with 330 million people, has six.

It's a hot Sunday morning in August, and I'm in Madison, Wisconsin, for the 2019 competition's final day. As I get my bearings, a loud cheer rises from the swelling crowd around the Reebok tent.

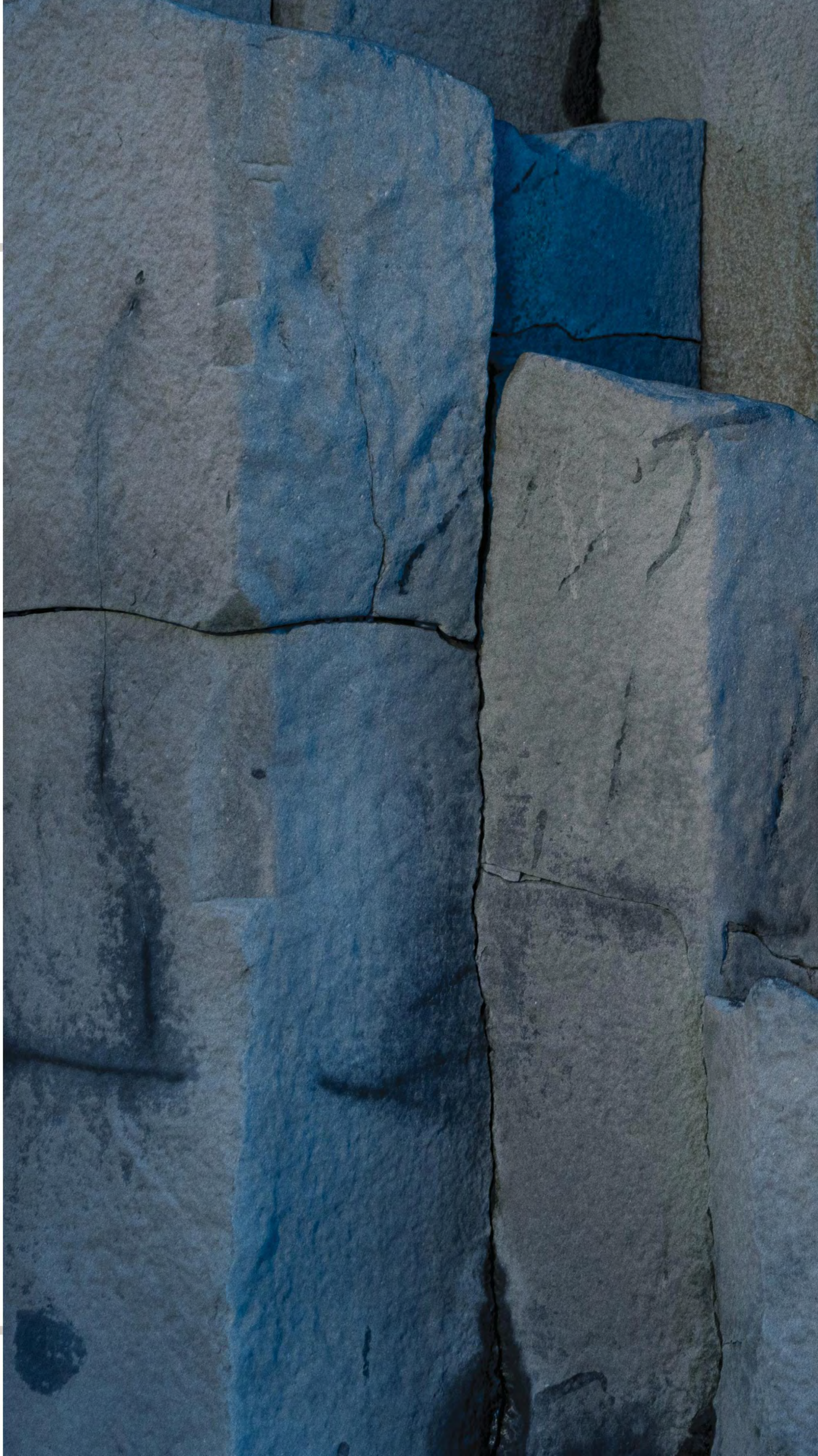
"Annie," someone behind me says.

"That's Annie!" someone shouts, pointing.

Two-time champion Annie Thorisdottir led a revolution back home after her 2011 CrossFit Games victory. On the final day of this year's competition, with a disappointing 12th-place finish already assured, she is teaching a class to a small group lucky enough to have signed up. The crowd roars when she takes off her shirt to reveal her abs. When the workout ends, she signs autographs and poses for pictures. Her parents stand to the side, her dad smiling. Annie points to Thorir and Agnes and shouts.

"My parents!"

"We made her!" Agnes shouts.





KATRIN DAVIDSDOTTIR
CROSSFIT ATHLETE
TWO-TIME CROSSFIT
GAMES CHAMPION,
2019 FOURTH-PLACE FINISHER
AGE 26
5-7, 150 POUNDS

Photographed by
Benedict Evans
May 22, Iceland

PRODUCTION BY BEGGI JONSSON AND
LALLI JONSSON/REPUBLIK; HAIR
AND MAKEUP BY GUÐBJÖRG HULDIS

Everyone laughs, although her joke evokes the central question hovering over the Games: Where do these people come from, exactly? I'd met a friend for dinner the night before. He owns a CrossFit gym and is a retired Navy SEAL. We talked about the type of person who seeks this out. Most athletes endure the pain of training to get to some beautiful flow state. For these athletes, pain is the reward. People drawn to compete in these Games are all at least a little broken, he says: "You never know why they're here or who they're here for."

Just after leaving Annie's parents, I run into Odda Helgadóttir, the mom of the best Icelandic CrossFitter in the world, Katrin Davíðsdóttir, who's a friend of Annie's and an inheritor of the tradition she created. Odda is standing in line for an acai bowl and carrying her daughter's laminated face on a stick. Katrin is also a two-time winner and is currently in fifth place.

We head inside the arena for the next two events. A video about Katrin plays on the huge screen: blond hair in a bouncy ponytail, a topo map of traps and glutes, an easy smile replaced with cold eyes. She talks about her daily obsession to be the best version of herself. When she takes the floor, her mom screams words of encouragement in Icelandic. Katrin struggled this morning in the open water swim, a mental hurdle. The most important muscle in CrossFit is the mind; she repeatedly failed to lift 80 kilos before doing more than that easily—because the weights were measured in pounds, and so she didn't know. The athletes do two events back-to-back and Katrin wins both, climbing back into third place—good enough for a coveted spot on the podium if she can finish strong in the one remaining event.

THIRTY-SIX DAYS earlier, the morning before she moved to Cape Cod for a month to train in monastic seclusion for the Games, Katrin uncaps a marker and writes her WOD on the board at her suburban Boston gym. That's an abbreviation for "Workout of the Day." I didn't know the phrase before meeting Katrin, who recently turned 26. In black ink, she wrote out six stations of pain,



including the track work she did before coming into the gym. Her handwriting is so neat it hints at some turmoil swirling just beneath the surface. She draws a careful line, which looks straight to me but not to her. She erases and redraws it. This time she nods in satisfaction.

The bass on the huge stereo system hits low and hard in the sweat stink, playing prog rock and hair metal: *No, his mind is not for rent ... she's my cherry pie*. It's only my second visit to a CrossFit box and my first introduction to Katrin, who has more than 1.5 million Instagram followers and abdominal muscles like rumble strips on the highway. The abs have helped pay for not one but two Range Rovers. At the gym one day while she was showering, a woman dropped by to deliver something and asked to use the restroom. A few moments later, a fellow athlete realized what would happen to a civilian's basic understanding of their place in the food chain, not to mention their self-esteem, if they swung open a door to find Katrin stepping out of the shower with muscles rippling on top of muscles. She called across the gym, "Kat might be naked ... brief her!"

Katrin, like nearly all Icelandic women, is named for her father.

He is David. She is Davidsdottir.

She is trying once again to be the fittest woman on the planet. To best accomplish this, she lives in seclusion in this suburb, far from her friends and family in Iceland. Her coach, Ben Bergeron, and his family have become her second family; she moved here after failing to even qualify for the 2014 CrossFit Games and under his guidance won the event the next two years. She has finished in the top five every year since but hasn't been able to repeat that first-place success, which keeps her doubling and tripling down on the grind. Her hands bleed a lot. Sometimes she works her body so hard she loses peripheral vision or sees red and black dots.

No part of her life isn't scheduled in advance. Her sister, Hannah, is planning a wedding for next year. The proposed date is June 20—six weeks before the CrossFit Games.

"OK," Katrin told her. "It's your wedding. I'll be there, but I'll fly in and out."

"When can you have champagne and cake?" Hannah asked, and then she made a joke about taking the batteries out of Katrin's scale. Katrin carries a scale with her to restaurants to measure each component of a meal.

Her small group of friends at the gym understands. And inside her imagined monastery, she lives in a hermitage—a woman from a small island who has created an even smaller one for herself, population: 1. All around her now, caterers are converting the gym for a birthday party for one of the long-time staffers. Everyone is planning what to wear—debating gym gear versus "real-person clothes." Katrin wants to go home and recover. She skips the party.

LATER WE SIT at a nearby Whole Foods and mostly we laugh. She's funny. Her coach correctly described her laugh as sounding like confetti, and her dimples soften the rocks of her shoulders and arms. In the serious moments, she tells me the story of her family. Three years ago, she lost the most important person in her life, her grandmother Heba, whom she called Amma. It happened so quickly—Amma went into the hospital feeling tired on a Monday and died of cancer four days later—that Katrin still hasn't really processed the hole in her life or made sense of why the loss left her so adrift.

Amma floated through every season of life with grace. An ambassador's wife, she dressed in pearls and accompanied Queen Elizabeth on a royal visit to Iceland. She also screamed from the bleachers at her sons' sporting events so aggressively that they asked her to stop coming. Her letters of hope and inspiration to Katrin still serve as motivation. "I've had a couple of really vivid dreams, and I'll wake up and start to cry," Katrin says. "I wake up crying and don't want it to be over. When you stop and think about nature, I just feel there's so much power around us, and that's where I can feel her. When the birds are singing, I feel her a lot."

Her grandfather Helgi lives in Iceland and hears the birds sing every day. He is be-

coming a singing bird himself. This year is the first he won't attend the CrossFit Games. Yesterday, moving slow but still steady enough to cast, he caught two salmon in the glacial river that runs wide and cold below the family's summerhouse. His son-in-law sees him going down to the water where he's been going since his first memories and thinks, "It's no longer summer—it's autumn turning to winter."

Katrin's people have been coming to that bend of water since 1934. It's their spiritual home. They are a family of achievers. Her grandfather's name is Helgi Agustsson, and he served as Iceland's premier diplomat for a generation, the ambassador to England, Denmark and the United States, in addition to managing the island's relationship with the U.S. military. During Iceland's Cod Wars with England in the 1970s—when the Royal Navy and Icelandic Coast Guard faced off over fishing limits—he fought for the nation in London, conducting a one-man media and diplomacy blitz. Katrin's grandpa stared down the English and won, and while the United Kingdom doesn't remember these minor skirmishes, Iceland never forgets.

"Oh my gosh," Katrin says with pride. "He *handled* the Cod Wars."

Sitting with me, she starts riffing on everything she wants to accomplish in her life. She's one of the best in the world at something and still finds herself consumed with what she might become.

"I really want to go to school," she says.

"I'd love to be a doctor," a few moments later.

She's rolling now. I'm a spectator.

"But when am I gonna be a doctor?"

She thinks about her athletic career. "How long do I want to do this? I want to have a family and kids. Am I gonna go to school until I'm 40 and then be a doctor?"

Lately she's been scheduling meetings to talk to experts in chemotherapy and oncology.

"I want to learn everything about blood and cancer."

Amma died from blood cancer.

She's studying chemo now because Amma didn't survive her first dose.

"It makes me so mad, and I want to fix it," she says.

A few seconds pass. "I love working with kids."

A few seconds pass. "I also want to work on TV."

Her mind is a theater of brilliance, yes, but also of chaos. It's clear her greatest strength is also her greatest weakness. She is capable of incredible dreams and often incapable of managing the mental tides that create those dreams. CrossFit, for now, silences the chaos. She's a person searching, for stillness, for perfection, for a better version of herself. Meditation is her latest attempt to find a quiet place, an Iceland of the mind. She glows when she talks about the island, and her family's summerhouse there, where her grandfather is currently staying and fishing and playing solitaire at the dining room table, listening to jazz. Outside, the tall trees rise up to protect the family from the harsh wind howling off the glaciers. She can feel her own history and the power of the island in the mountains and oceans, and in a white river with an old man standing on the bank and casting a line. When the fly hits the water, they are connected: Katrin and Helgi and the river and the fish and the volcano and the island itself. Her family baptized her with water from that river, bathing her in the past and a new future at the same time. "I have a million things I want to do, and sometimes I have to ..." Her voice trails off.

THAT NIGHT, AS Katrin packs for Cape Cod, I take a red-eye to a volcanic rock surrounded by the North Atlantic. Iceland rises uneasily atop two tectonic plates that separate by almost an inch a year, the planet actively ripping the island apart. If the fire from the volcanoes doesn't get you, then the ice of the ocean will: The arctic water will kill an unlucky overboard sailor in minutes. It's also dark for six months of the year, which is super great for the national mental health. Despite all this, or maybe because of it, the female CrossFit stars are proud to spread the gospel of strong Icelandic women, and of a culture that produces and encourages such strength. They compete in a workout

they've named The Dottir, which is also the name of Katrin's new memoir. The name symbolically carries the wildness of their island and the unbreakable bonds of family that the island values.

Icelanders are famous for gender equality, I read on the plane. They elected the first female president in the world. Statutes limit the wage gap, and politicians cite some of the most liberal maternity leave, public child care and abortion laws on the planet. The CrossFit Dottirs often point to the Viking heritage of strong women as their inspiration; the famous Icelandic sagas are filled with them, as heroic and fierce as their husbands. I'd met Katrin and would soon meet Annie, along with both their moms, to ask how that history of public gender equality manifests in their lives, and in the lives of their fierce CrossFit daughters.

In the summer of 2011, Katrin was an 18-year-old former athlete searching for a sport—after more than 10 years of gymnastics, she'd walked away—and that's when Annie won the CrossFit Games for the first time. Her victory became an inheritance to pass on, as women all over Iceland started CrossFit. Katrin idolized Annie and began training with her. That 2011 win changed both their lives. Katrin started on the road toward her bubble. Annie's med school plans faded away and she opened a gym, CrossFit Reykjavik, which now has 1,500 members, including her mom and Katrin's grandfather, and a long waiting list of people desperate for whatever magic proximity to Annie brings.

Once I get to Iceland, I swing open the doors to CrossFit Reykjavik and enter the sleek lobby. Annie follows shortly after, coming through the front door in flight, flashing an electric smile and the confidence of a person inhabiting a space she loves and controls. Wearing workout clothes that show off her hard-earned body, she is both beautiful and powerful—an ur-Icelandic ideal. Her gym feels light and airy. There is no macho vibe. During one of the breaks, Miley Cyrus' "Party in the USA" comes on. As the chorus approaches, everyone starts to hop up and down. They let the sound build, until, finally ... everyone throws their

head back and ...

... "I PUT MY HAAAANDS UP!" they all sing together, nodding their heads "LIKE YEAH!" and moving their hips "LIKE YEAH!"

One of Annie's male partners laughs. "So much testosterone!" he says.

ANNIE'S MOTHER, Agnes Vidarsdottir, comes up to CrossFit Reykjavik to explain how her daughter's success, and the success of Annie's friend Katrin, really began when the first boat motor arrived in Iceland.

The endless interrogation of light during an Icelandic summer leads to a peculiar mania in which the world beyond these shores doesn't even seem real, whether you're a visiting tourist or a local who can trace your family back seven or eight centuries, as most Icelanders can. Agnes and I find a table, and when I ask about the Dottirs, she doesn't talk about CrossFit but about that first motor, which arrived on these shores in 1902, and the almost medieval world of privation that existed before the 2-horsepower engine sputtered to life.

"It's such a short time since people had to suffer to just make it here," she says.

Iceland has a brutal past. The first people arrived in A.D. 874, fleeing a Norwegian king who must have been next-level nuts because for the next 1,030 years people lived—barely—in homes made of dirt and grass because there weren't a lot of trees. They tried to get crops to grow in volcanic rock and took small rowboats out into the ocean to get enough fish to salt and smoke and survive the winter. Intentionally rotten shark became a delicacy. Starvation and drowning were the leading causes of death. Developing a patriarchy was a luxury people didn't have. Farming families all worked, men and women alike. The equality Agnes describes so proudly isn't the result of a modern awakening. It's deeply hardwired.

"Icelandic men are not afraid of strong women," she says. "They want them to be strong."

This world spun uninterrupted for a thousand years. Then someone brought a motor.





“The waterfall was this nonstop flow of powerful energy. I feel like Iceland is so powerful. It’s so pure. It’s so special to me.”

KATRIN DAVIDSDOTTIR

Overnight the country leaped into a modern world. Suddenly the fishermen could catch more than they could eat. They could sell fish and have an economy.

This isn’t ancient history. The nation didn’t become fully independent until 1944. For the first six years of her life, Annie lived in a small coastal village with her grandparents, who knew well that old life.

“Her grandpa comes from very strong-minded farmers,” Agnes explains. “He’s 83 now, and he does 10 to 15 pullups easily. And he started this thing with the grandkids, a competition. They got money for each pullup they could do. Annie started doing pullups at 4 years old. She has two older brothers, and I always told her she could do the same they could, so she was very competitive toward them. She won the pullup competitions, of course.”

As Agnes and I sit in the back room of the coffee shop, Annie comes in for a boost and runs into us. She waves and smiles. Her mom smiles back. Annie leaves tomorrow for training camp in Wisconsin, and this is the last time they’ll see each other before the Games. Agnes wishes her luck and love.

Annie turns to me and grins and switches on her best American teenager accent.

“Crush those bitches,” she says, and laughs.

SITTING OUTSIDE THE same café, Annie and Frederik Aegidius, her boyfriend and coach, go over their final packing lists. She’s been moving away from traditional CrossFit toward a hybrid of styles they are inventing in real time. “She’s been doing this at the very highest level for 10 years,” Frederik says. “The body has taken a beating.”

Annie shoots him a look of mock disgust.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

He laughs with her.

“If it would have continued the way we trained from 2010 to 2014,” he says, “I would have given it another two seasons. Three, tops.”

“My body would be f---ed,” she says.

She’s about to turn 30, and just as she trailblazed for Katrin at the beginning, now she knows things about the coming years that Katrin can’t yet see. Many days, she and

Frederik don't even do a quote-unquote CrossFit workout. They take bike advice from professional cyclists and weightlifting advice from professional lifters and so on. "That's been a very important change," she says. "That it's OK not to be doing CrossFit workouts full intensity all the time."

The biggest change, though, came in her head. In 2015, Annie suffered heatstroke trying to complete a workout named for Navy SEAL Michael Murphy, a Medal of Honor winner killed in action. Doctors worried she'd damaged her kidneys, and after two and a half liters of IV fluid to combat severe dehydration, she tried to continue but ultimately quit. For a full year, she refused to deal with the fear that built up. Her mental state got so bad her mother refused to ever attend another CrossFit Games if she didn't seek professional help.

Annie sighs remembering the ultimatum.

"There was a decent amount of crying and drama," she says.

Her ability to look past the sport is something she wants for her friend.

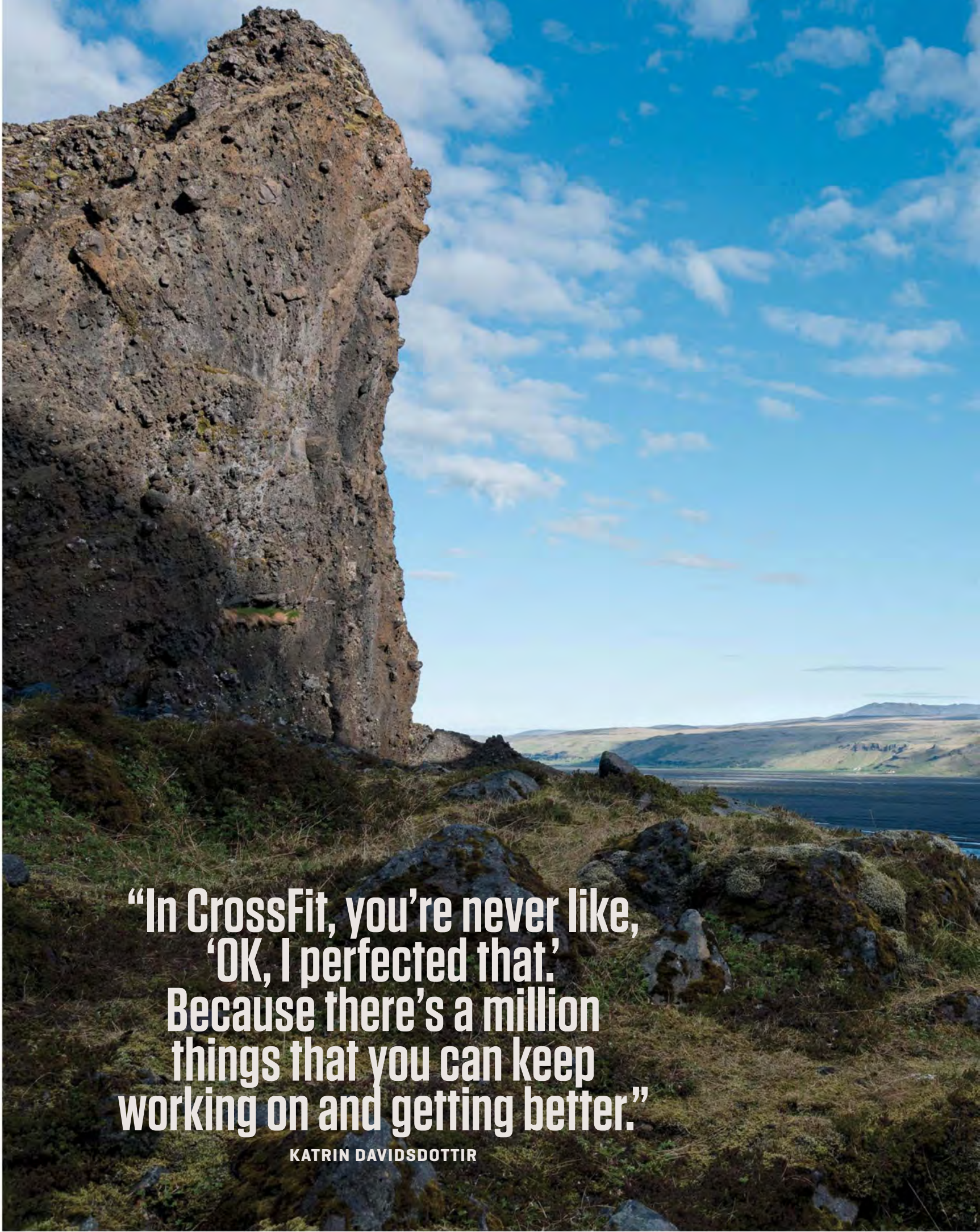
"I love it when Katrin is here so we get to train together," she says.

Someday Katrin might move back from her safe Boston cocoon. Her friends and family joke that what she wants most in life is a boyfriend Frederik likes. Annie senses a peace when her friend comes back across the Atlantic to visit. "I do think she benefits a lot from coming home," she says. "Because it's so easy to get caught up in just CrossFit."

"Of course it matters," Frederik says, "but it's not everything."

"You have to remember it's not everything," Annie says. She has a pregnancy clause in one of her sponsorship contracts. She and Frederik are thinking of starting a family. Her friends wonder if this might be her last Games as a solo competitor. She's managed to throttle back her myopic intensity while not impacting her fitness.

"That's what gets the hardest," she says. "When you start isolating yourself. I did that at a certain time. I just wanted to train, and when I was not training, I wanted to be at home recovering. I didn't want to meet friends or family."



"In CrossFit, you're never like, 'OK, I perfected that.' Because there's a million things that you can keep working on and getting better."

KATRIN DAVIDSDOTTIR

Her mother's intervention shifted something. She doesn't even weigh all her food now! "If we are going out to dinner with our family," she says, "I'm not bringing my scale."

"Katrin's not there yet," I say.

"No," they both say.

KATRIN'S MOM, Odda Helgadóttir, took my email request seriously and spent the days before my arrival talking it over with family and co-workers, really trying to come up with an answer about how the culture of their

country and family created her daughter.

We meet at a Reykjavik restaurant called Snaps.

We sit at the bar.

"I love the question," she says right at the start. "It got me thinking about so much stuff. I was really young when I had her."

Odda is irreverent, thoughtful and smart, her pixie cut gray but still punk rock enough to evoke her wilder days in London, when her dad was the ambassador and her mother a socialite hostess, when she ran with the invisible and forgotten in Leicester Square.



She still goes to shows and still tries to get to the front row. She's a pit girl even now: opinionated, loud, the daughter of a man who always told her she could do anything. As a kid, she traded her bike with the basket for a BMX. Her mom would be mortified and her dad giddy when she'd insult the politics of powerful guests. "I think my dad was probably a born feminist," she says. "My mother raised me to be a feminist—if I could just be a little more girlie."

As a teenager, she says, she rebelled against her parents' status and prestige. She

ran with a rough crowd. Then, at barely 15, she got pregnant.

Odda remembers two things about her father during that time, moments she'll never forget. The first was a phone conversation she overheard. Her boarding school wanted to kick her out, and he called the headmaster and demanded to know what rule she'd broken. With the same intensity he fought the English he fought for her. As she heard him blistering this guy on the phone, she remembered what had been briefly obscured by rebellion: Her fa-

ther believed in her.

The second came during the ultrasound. Her pregnancy had caused a stir, what-will-the-neighbors-think hand-wringing. Then the family saw Katrin for the first time. The next day, Helgi went out on his own and picked out a silver pram, which he proudly brought home. Her parents never said another discouraging or disapproving word about her or her pregnancy.

Even with the support at home, she felt like everyone who saw her with Katrin assumed she couldn't possibly raise a child and that this child would pay some future cost for a clueless, overmatched mom. So she started with the books, and after she'd read them all, she said that she and her little girl would match and better every milestone set for babies. "I really wanted to prove a point," Odda says. "If the book said she should know five words by the time she's 1, let's make that five plus a couple. I had that oddball balance between being young and stupid and being out to prove something."

Her doctors gave her weight targets that Katrin should hit.

"I turned Katrin's weight gain between checkups into a competition," she says.

She took 15-month-old Katrin backpacking around Thailand with her. At 2, Katrin started helping with the dishes. Odda got her a stool and put her to work.

At 12, Katrin came home at the end of a school year.

"Where's your report card?" her mom asked.

"I didn't get it."

"Show me."

Katrin balled it up and flung it at her mom. The report card had an A-minus.

"That A-minus makes it really ugly," she said.

Odda explained that an A-minus was a good grade. Katrin looked at her with disgust on her face and said, "Maybe for you it is."

Katrin remains intense to parent. She's one of the best in the world at her sport, and even that isn't enough. "Katrin's talking about what to do post-CrossFit," Odda says. "At some point, she said something that stuck out. All her friends are finishing their degrees, finishing their master's, and

she feels left behind.”

Odda stopped her and asked, “Sorry?”

“They’ve all done something with their lives.”

Odda tried to talk logic.

“Can she hear that?” I ask.

“We’re working on it,” she says.

So now Odda finds herself fighting the very traits she instilled. She pushes Katrin to enjoy life instead of dominating it. A few years ago, she told her that the standards she was holding herself to were too hard on others. She sees Katrin laughing at herself now more than she did. She doesn’t internalize every mistake and criticism. But still her mother worries about her perfectionism—and worries it’s her fault. “I probably grew up with a chip on my shoulder, and she came along really early and, now that I think about it, it was probably a little us against the world,” she says. “I’m not sure all of it was positive. If I had a time machine, I’d go back and ease up a little bit.”

ODDA OFFERS TO take me out to the summerhouse to fish with her father. A few days later, as we drive out of Reykjavik, she explains the summerhouse’s role in their family and its mythology. “That place is just holy,” she says. “There’s only ever been one rule at the summerhouse. You’re not allowed to argue. There aren’t any bad memories. You’re not allowed to take negativity there.”

Katrin becomes Katy there, buried quietly in a book, not checking her phone. She’s at peace there, unburdened by herself. The cabin is where Odda got married and where Katrin will be married one day and where next summer Hannah’s wedding will take place. In the five days since I’d seen Katrin, Hannah had moved her ceremony by two months so her sister could attend and stay and drink champagne and have cake. For now, Katrin’s career sets the family calendar.

Hannah has a 4-month-old daughter at home. It was the first birth in the family since Amma died. Now Odda sings the same Icelandic nursery rhymes to her granddaughter that Amma once sang to Katrin. It’s funny what a baby does for a family. The strangest memories are rushing back. One

story about bugs comes to Odda, for some reason. Spiders move around the summerhouse like they own the place, and one summer the family went on the offensive. After consultations and planning, they got jugs of pesticide designed specifically for spiders and went spraying in all the corners and dark, hidden places, “the nooks and crannies,” as Odda puts it, and then settled back to enjoy a spider-free summer in paradise.

But they’d messed with the food chain. Without the arachnid nuclear deterrent, the flies emerged from their bunkers and revealed in their new freedom. A blanket of biting, buzzing bugs descended, driving the family indoors. The unintended consequences of trying to bend nature didn’t stop there. Amma noticed first.

“Have you guys noticed the birds are gone?” she asked.

The family didn’t know if they’d changed the habitat forever.

“What have we done?” they wondered to each other, dreaming all winter long of the songs coming down from the trees. They could only wait to come back the next year and see whether spiders once again crawled out from the nooks and crannies and ate the flies, which would open up the air for the ghostly music of the singing birds.

Odda follows the road out of town into the moonscape of rural Iceland.

“Next stop: summerhouse,” she says.

A LONG PATH beneath the canopy of branches and leaves leads down to a clearing of grass and a flagpole with the Icelandic flag flapping in the breeze, the summerhouse tucked back among the trees. Helgi opens the door of the cabin and pours me a gin and tonic. His hair is white. He wears a fitted baseball cap with the measurements of the largest salmon he ever caught embroidered on the side—55 centimeters wide, 1.8 meters long, 30.6 pounds—the largest salmon caught in Iceland in 1973, he says.

“My boasting hat,” he adds with a smile.

“La Vie en Rose” plays on his laptop, filling the warm, cozy cabin. He twirls his late wife across the dance floors of his mind. His English accent is hard to place, formed and broken and reset by his many moves around

the world. He putters around the house and leads me to the deck.

We pull up chairs and sip our drinks.

He points to the stand of aspen.

Iceland is home to only three native trees, he says.

“The aspen, the rowan tree and the birch.”

He is forever working into conversation things that elevate Iceland beyond its population and square mileage. John Ford based one of his movies on the Icelandic sagas, he says. One of Wagner’s famous operas takes 80 percent of its lyrics from the sagas too. Neil Armstrong trained for the moon landing here. The first U.S. Marines deployed overseas in World War II landed in Iceland. Did you know that Katrin skipped a grade she was so advanced and made perfect scores in physics and chemistry? He sees her greatness as something more than a personal victory, as a load-bearing brick in his wall of Icelandic exceptionalism.

He’s proud of her as a grandfather but also as a citizen.

The ice melts slowly in our glasses, the gin floral and bracing.

He wants to tell me a story.

“We established a commonwealth in 930,” he begins, and when he says “we,” he means everyone who has ever called this rock home, and it’s clear he feels connected to all of those other operators of history because his job put the levers briefly in his hands.

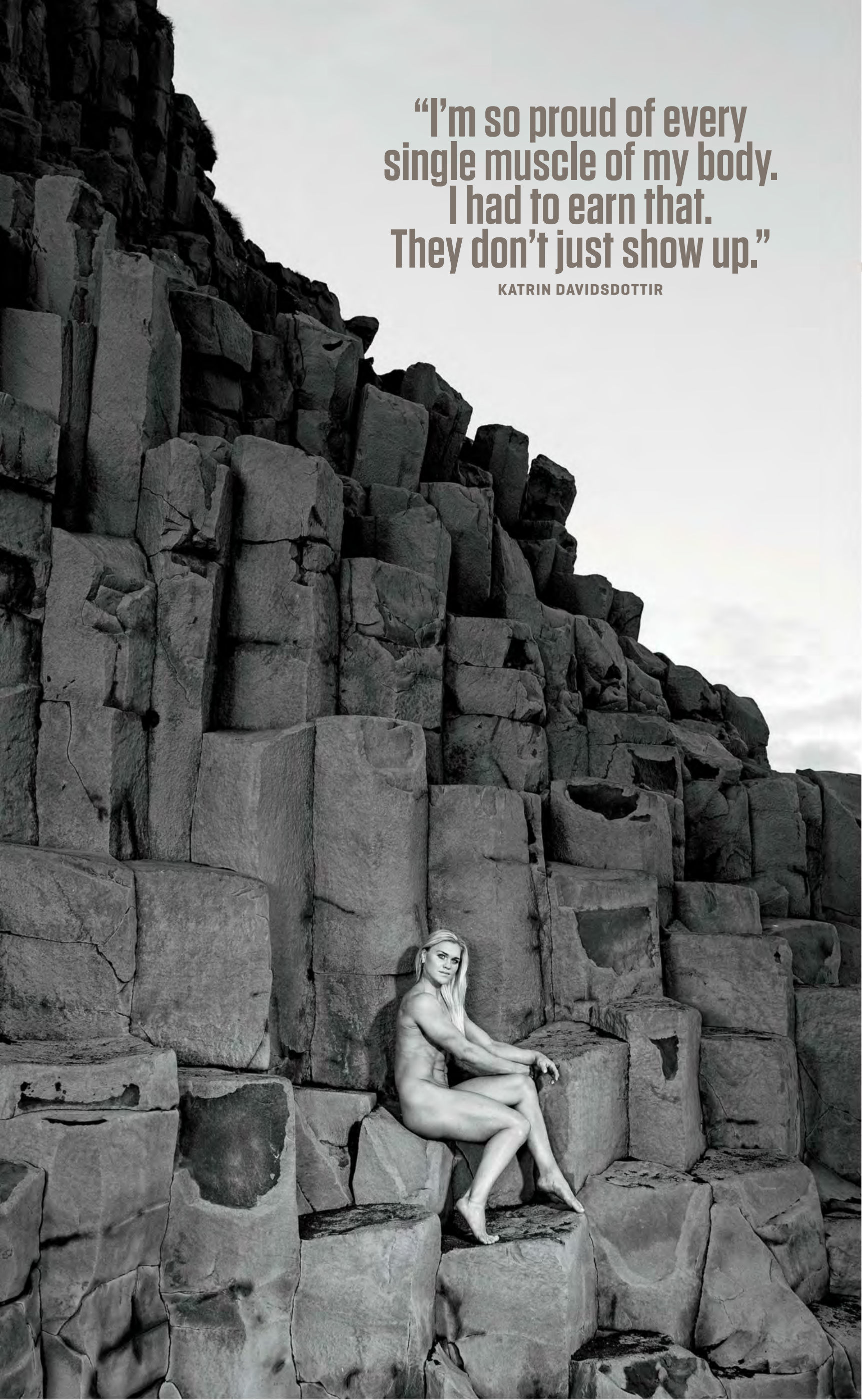
His voice gets low. I lean in.

“We went through many very hard centuries,” he says. He has lived those centuries in his mind, worked in capitals around the world to do right by the hardy men and women who survived them, who endured Danish trade monopolies and the black plague and frequent volcanic eruptions that killed people and cows, condemning the survivors to slow death by starvation. On these isolated farms, people looked for calories anywhere they might be found, even in the sagas that had been written by hand on animal skins, men and women forced to eat their own history.

“People were cooking them to survive,” he says. “Terrible times we went through.”

Iceland’s proximity to England made it





**“I’m so proud of every
single muscle of my body.
I had to earn that.
They don’t just show up.”**

KATRIN DAVIDSDOTTIR

valuable during World War II as a stopover for lend-lease material. The Marshall Plan flooded Reykjavik with cash, which Helgi says Iceland used to buy 36 fishing trawlers. These trawlers finally pulled people from poverty. English fishermen still roamed the seas near the coast between 1952 and 1976, so Iceland set fishing limits for foreign vessels: first 4 miles, then 12, then 50, then 200. Each time England protested and boycotted, but Iceland’s strategic importance in the Cold War gave its diplomats—including Helgi—enough leverage to defeat its more powerful rivals. When Iceland broke off diplomatic relations briefly in 1976, Helgi wrote and delivered the note informing the British.

The 1960s and ’70s were a patriotic time in Iceland, and as the people focused on the immediate history being made out in the Atlantic in the daily headlines, they also grew interested in their own ancient history—and in the great literary manuscripts of the sagas. For centuries, the original copies of the sagas had been housed in a Danish university because of the same kind of cultural pillaging that brought so many Egyptian artifacts to London. Citizens began agitating for this literature to be returned, and in 1971, the first boat of sagas from Copenhagen arrived at the harbor. Thousands of people showed up at the docks to greet them.

Helgi connects the dots.

The Cod Wars birthed patriotism, which birthed a renewed interest in the sagas, which told of Icelandic heroes, many of whom were strong, fierce women who took no crap from any man. Four years after the first sagas arrived, 90 percent of the women in the country went on strike. Offices stopped running, and housewives stopped cleaning and cooking. So many dads had to try to sort dinner that the grocery stores ran out of sausages. A women’s political party, the first of its kind in the world, was formed. A few years later, the world’s first female president was elected. Thirty-five years after that, Katrin was named the fittest woman on the planet.

He looks up at the blue flag with the white and red cross.

The sun is high in the sky. The grill is hot, and it's time to cook some meat for dinner.

"Have you had Icelandic lamb?" he asks eagerly.

Around us are weaving spiders and a welcoming chorus of birds.

HELGI TAKES HIS plate and sits down at the picnic table outside. We all join him. This is the first time he's eaten here since his wife died. Something about remembering the history of Iceland—his history, their history—and talking proudly about Katrin, whom Amma adored, has made him hungry for memories he's been avoiding.

We laugh and pass a bottle of good Barolo. After dinner, he goes inside. Fly rods and bait casters wait above his head in the crossbeams of the ceiling.

"I'm salmon fishing tomorrow," he says. "Could life be better?"

He sighs, answering his own question.

He pulls out an old tabloid magazine that showed him and Amma dressed for some fancy affair, her in a white skirt and blouse looking statuesque. The headline calls her an "Icelandic Classic."

He lingers on the photograph.

"Here's her grandmother," he says softly.

He digs out an album of photos. Katrin, her face painted like a tiger. Sitting with Helgi in the secret garden in Hyde Park in London, wearing a full Tottenham kit. He has always believed in her. "The question remains," he says. "How will she continue? At some point she will change course. What course will she try? At one time she asked me, 'How do you become an ambassador?'"

We all sit down around the television. Helgi wants to watch their recently digitized home movies. More red wine is poured. An hour passes. On screen, Katrin isn't even a year old, on a vacation to Ireland, and Helgi quietly turns his thumbs in a circle, over and over again as he watches, a nervous tic. He grips his wineglass. Katrin is leading the adults around, and Helgi is pleased. He calls her Katy.

"And she has a mind of her own!" he says with joy. "She is in control!"

The videos capture normal, quiet days here at the summerhouse, all the kids in the



hot tub, or Katrin and her sister turning cartwheels in the front yard, landing softly in the green grass. She's every age in these movies, a newborn to a young woman. She is always changing. The summerhouse looks exactly the same.

"This was a very important part of her life," Helgi says.

She's playing cards with Amma. Gin rummy with her grandparents helped pass many lazy days. Helgi digs underneath the table until he comes out with an old notebook. In it are the scores to decades-old card games, generations of card games. Katrin played with him and her brother Jack.

He flips pages—"she won ... she won"—until he returns the notebook to its home beneath the coffee table. The house is covered in reminders of Katrin's presence, and her absence, and the promise of her return, and of all the memories and feelings associated with a lifetime of coming, going and returning.

"I have so many things like this," he says.

We all smile at Katrin as a young girl with big high heels dangling off her feet.

"Amma's shoes," he says.

Katrin smiles at the camera, wearing a necklace and fashionable chunky earrings.

Helgi finally tears up.

"Amma is putting her jewelry on her, and she loves it. Oh, she loves this. She wants more, and Amma is getting her more."

He wipes his eyes.

Amma and Katrin spin together in circles, stomping their feet, and then Katrin stares up at her grandmother with a look of awe and devotion on her face. Amma wears a green and blue dress. Katrin stops and stares into the camera. She leans to the side, mock shy, cocks her head and smiles. I'm watching Katrin, but Helgi can't take his eyes off Amma.

THE NEXT MORNING, Helgi and I wake early and go about the familiar pre-fishing routine that strips away the years. We silently drink coffee while packing and checking gear. He hands me a rod affixed with a Danish bait caster, and I fiddle with the mechanism. I feel close to him in this silence, and I believe he feels close to me too. A river

often brings intimacy. We ride down over dry land where wild water flowed when he first came here as a boy. He says the shrinking river makes him want to cry. We don't talk much.

I stand alongside the river and aim my fly for the silver ruffle of current.

The first few casts land short.

"You must do better," he says.

I focus and soon feel tension on the end of the line. With a sharp but controlled snatch, I set the hook. The only other time I hooked a salmon like this, in Alaska, I lost it while moving downstream over slick rocks. Helgi rushes over and coaches me in a calm and patient voice until finally a big salmon flops out of the water onto the gravel bank. Together we lay it out on the cleaning table, dark gray fins with a shiny silver belly. We are both drunk with the euphoria of a day's first catch.

"Did you fish here with your grandfather?" I ask.

There's a pause.

He tells me he never knew his grandfather. A few moments pass. He's considering something. Then he continues.

He says he never knew his mother either. She died in childbirth.

His father asked his boss, a local baker, to watch Helgi for 10 days while he handled the logistics. That's the original dot. The baker and his wife became Helgi's parents. His real father gave him away.

He didn't have a family or a history, so he invented both. He wanted so badly to be part of something that with will and ambition he forced his way into the history of Iceland itself. That's how he stared down the English in the Cod Wars. That's how he became the man photographed with his beautiful wife in formal dress. Icelandic Classics.

He'd started his life an orphan with no past, but Amma saw a strong man with a limitless future. They journeyed together. It was their life, not his or hers, and without her, he's something of an orphan again. Except that isn't true. He's got his children and grandchildren—their children and grandchildren—and Katrin's ambition is further proof that the reinvented life he and his wife imagined won't die with them. It will go on

and on, passed through time.

Helgi falls quiet as the water rushes past and the silver fish glitters in the sun.

He gathers his gear and returns to the river.

TWENTY-NINE DAYS later, Katrin fades in her final event. She finishes next to last, which drops her to fourth place and off the podium. Her thin smile as she leaves the arena floor is forced. The next evening, she walks into an independent bookstore in downtown Madison to read and sign copies of *Dottir*. A huge crowd has gathered, standing room only, with her publicist frantically trying to find more copies because the store had sold out already, 80 books gone before she even begins. The room is filled to capacity with the storm conjured by her butterfly wings, and the wings of Annie before her. Many in the crowd are women, fit and wearing Davidsdottir shirts. A little girl comes in with her dad. Her shirt says "Strong."

Katrin explains how proud she is to be a Dottir.

She tells her story again, and as always, I learn something new and understand her more. Turns out, Amma and Odda were the ones who first suggested she try CrossFit. They started all this, and for now, the wheel they set in motion will continue to turn. Katrin says she will improve in the coming year. She preaches to hungry ears about self-determination and the power of will.

Her parents wait in the back of the room.

Her mom tells me Katrin has a boyfriend, who matches up with none of the checklist she's used for so long as a shield from distraction—for starters, this new boy is American—and that she is leaving soon for a vacation in Italy. A vacation! Her family is shocked. When the talk ends, I go tell her goodbye as she sits down to sign books. I make a joke about the upcoming trip—how proud we all are of her.

She smiles.

"Let's see if it happens first," she says.

On my way out, I see Odda and relay the conversation. She raises her eyebrows and smiles.

"Oh, she's going," she says. ■



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KATRIN DAVIDSDOTTIR

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